

Chapter One: Give us your children

The rain was coming down in sheets, and it soaked through her shoes as she ran, trying to gain the shelter of her apartment building lobby before getting thoroughly soaked.

She was about to cross the last street as a large, dark car sped by, sending up a column of water that proceeded to hit her full on. Becoming thoroughly soaked was no longer an issue, or rather, *avoiding* becoming thoroughly soaked. She couldn't be more wet if she were at the bottom of a pool.

"I bloody hate London!" she yelled at the rear lights of the expensive car as it drove away, then, resigned, walked across the street and into the lobby of her building. There was no longer any reason to run.

She found herself almost at the elevators before she became aware of the figures approaching her. Still, she wasn't nervous, exactly. She was, after all, in the well-lit lobby of an exceptionally busy apartment complex.

But the doorman was nowhere to be seen. Which was, in itself, strange....

"Miss Kennedy? May we have a word?" One of the figures spoke. She turned, in surprise. How had they known her name?

"Yes?" she asked in her firmest voice. She had never been one to be intimidated. By anyone.

There were three of them. Two large and one smaller...well, two men and one woman, she assumed. They all wore hooded cloaks.

"What can I do for you? And how do you know my name?"

"You are Maura Kennedy, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You're a reporter? You work for a news service?"

"Yes?" she was losing patience. The man, she assumed it was a man, raised his hands and removed his hood. She saw a head of bright red hair before she looked at the other two. They, too removed their hoods. One was a very large, very imposing black man – the other had....

Shocking pink hair?

"Who are you?"

"My name's..." The pink haired woman began, stepping forward.

"Our names are unimportant right now," the red haired man cut her off. "Miss Kennedy, we need you to come with us..."

"Not bloody likely!" she said sarcastically. "I don't even know who the hell you are. Until you give me your names and a darned good reason, I won't be going anywhere."

"Miss Kennedy...it really is very important that we speak with you..." The black man smiled. "I promise you, there is nothing....underhanded....going on here. I would ask you to trust us."

"Why do you want to speak to me?"

"Well, it's not us, exactly," the red-haired man spoke again. "We have come to take you to someone who needs to speak with you."

"Why?"

"Because you have a talent that we need. You are Maura Kennedy, the foreign correspondent who has been reporting from the middle east for the past six months, writing for a mug...for the news service, yes?"

"Yes." She was beginning to get it now. For four years, on and off, she'd been writing stories from the increasingly tense environment of Riyadh. She'd been the observer in many conflicts between American and British troops and the insurgents there. These...people...in their odd cloaks and odder mannerisms, were obviously representing a faction that she had perhaps been less than complimentary to in her

writing. She automatically reached into her bag for her can of pepper spray.

"I'm warning you...."

"Miss Kennedy," the black man spoke. "You really have nothing to fear. We're on the side of the good guys. We would like you to come to speak to our...superior. There is nothing to fear, really."

"And just who is your 'superior'?" She asked cuttingly, not letting go of the can in her bag, but not pulling it out, either. She noticed the red-haired man and the woman with the hot pink hair had their hands concealed in their cloaks...were they armed?

Don't be stupid! She thought, *Of course they're armed!*

"Can I at least go and put on some dry clothes?" She asked, not quite sure why she was even considering going with them.

"That can be taken care of...." the woman of the hot pink hair laid a hand on her arm and smiled, and Maura immediately felt a tug behind her navel that almost made her want to vomit.

Of course, she didn't. She was too busy fainting.

"I *told* you not to use it until she was ready!"

"She said she'd come!"

"She didn't...she asked if she could go and change her clothes."

"Suggesting that *after* she did that, she would come!"

"Did she actually say the words 'I'll come'?"

"Well....not exactly..."

"Ron, how many times do I have to tell you...."

"Stuff it, okay, Nymph? I...."

"Oh, God...." Maura worked her head around, trying to work out a monster kink in the muscles of her neck. She felt like she'd been on a three day bender...where the hell was she, anyhow?

She opened her eyes to find herself staring blearily at four people. The red head was there, looking down at her, and the woman with the day-glo hair...and the black man stood off to the side, in front of a door.

And there was another. A man with dark, dark hair and the most amazing eyes....so incredibly green. He was looking down at her with a look of concern.

"Miss Kennedy?"

"Where the hell am I?" She tried to sit, finding herself on a plush leather sofa in a very Victorian-looking room. The walls were a deep red, and the draperies were a deep wine color. All of the furniture looked incredibly expensive, all dark wood and plush upholstery. There was a fire burning in the biggest fireplace she'd ever seen. A person would be able to stand upright inside it.

"Where the hell am I?" she demanded.

"You're in my home, and the headquarters of our...organization," the green-eyed man said calmly. "I apologise for the...abrupt...manner in which my friends brought you here. I hope you will allow me to explain the urgency."

"You're darned right you'll be explaining, Mister!" Maura flung her legs over the side of the couch, sitting up. "Who the hell *are* you people?"

The four exchanged glances. The black-haired, green-eyed man stepped forward, holding out his hand to be shaken.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name, Miss Kennedy, is Harry Potter."

"You, sir, are out of your tree," she scooted back on the couch, away from him. "Harry Potter is a character in a series of children's fantasy

books written by a very talented but, in my humble opinion, slightly odd woman from Exeter."

To her amazement, he smiled. It was a genuine smile, even if it didn't reach his eyes.

"Ah, yes. The books. I should have known you'd have heard of them."

Heard of them? She thought. *She had inhaled them. J. K. Rowling had to be one of the most talented writers of fantasy fiction she'd ever encountered. She'd even considered changing her career after being so affected by the books...*

"And you're older than he is. Harry Potter is supposed to be a kid...."

"Well, I assure you, I didn't spring, fully grown, from an egg." This time the smile did reach his eyes, but there was something very sad about it. "I assure you, Miss Kennedy, I am, indeed, Harry Potter."

"Prove it." She demanded, ignoring the obvious mirth of the other three in the room. Apparently, this was something he wasn't normally asked to do.

"I'm afraid that I don't have any...documentation. Birth certificates are not quite as necessary in my world as they are in yours. However..." he raised his hand as if to run it through his hair, "...will this do?"

As he lifted the shaggy fringe, she looked to see a very clear scar, the shape of a lightning bolt, jaggedly scarring the skin of his forehead. In the books, it had been described as a thin line...this was something else altogether. The nasty, ragged mark was *very* noticable...and very real. Scars like that, Maura knew, were not easily faked.

Maura looked at it in stunned disbelief, then took her eyes from it to look around the room. Sure enough, she now noticed details. There was a large crest above the fireplace. It was a golden griffin, surrounded by a shield and crossed swords. In the corner stood a birdcage...in the was the most beautiful white owl Maura had ever seen.

"What do you want from me?" she croaked, her eyes going back to him. "Why have you brought me here?"

He looked at her for a moment, realizing from her stunned perusal of the room that she had accepted, at least in part, that they were who they said they were. He nodded. It was never easy for a muggle to understand.

"You are a writer, Miss Kennedy. A very talented reporter. An authority on the current...conflict...in the middle east. I...we...need your talents."

"What on earth for?"

"To expose the magical world...so that we can join forces and defeat the Dark Power that is currently rising. Alone, neither my world nor yours stands a chance. Together, we may yet be victorious."

And for the second time that day, Maura Kennedy did something she'd never before that day done in her life. She fainted.

"Bloody hell, Harry! Are you sure we got the right ruddy bird? She doesn't seem to be the type to stand up under the pressure in a war zone....she's fainted twice in the past hour!"

Harry smiled as he guided the wiry blond woman's limp body back down onto the couch. Ron had reined in his impetuosity over the years, but he was still colorful in his language.

"It's her, Ron. Trust me, being made aware of the magical world the first time can be a bit of a shock."

"So what now?" Nymphadora Tonks was seated on Harry's very large, very imposing desk in the corner, swinging her legs back and forth as she popped bubblegum the same shade as her hair. "Do you want to keep her here, or do we take advantage of this to take her back where she belongs?"

"Tonks," Harry rubbed his eyes. It was hard to look at her and not get a headache. She, too, was very colorful. In a totally different way than Ron. "Do you think you could do something about..."

"Sure, Harry." Tonks screwed up her face for a minute, then opened her eyes again as her hair grew three inches and turned a deep shade of brown.

"Thanks," he smiled. "Now, do you think you could go and get Ginny? Tell her to bring some Pepper-Up potion with her, if you would?"

"And she might bring a bottle of Firewhiskey, too," grumbled Ron as he sat down heavily in one of the leather upholstered chairs facing the fireplace.

Harry smiled again as he gazed down at the woman lying prone on his sofa and shook his head. This was going to be a lot more difficult than he originally thought. A lot more.

Maura surfaced to more voices. This time, she could hear the red head...Ron they had called him. The large, older, black man...well...she didn't know who he was. He didn't say much. The brightly colored woman must be Nymphadora Tonks...the young auror that was purported to be so clumsy....funny, she hadn't seemed clumsy.

And the black haired, green eyed man...Harry Potter. Really, truly, Harry Potter! She swallowed, then began to open her eyes.

"Shut it, you lot! She's coming around."

A new voice. Soft, feminine, but strong. Maura opened her eyes to see a blur of red before she winced and blinked, clearing her vision.

Once again, she was prone on the sofa, and this time, she looked up into a pair of very soft, concerned brown eyes.

"There, now...don't move too quickly," she said, putting a restraining hand on Maura's shoulder to hold her still. "Take a minute to get your bearings."

"Who are you?"

The young woman smiled. "I'm Ginny. Relax, it'll be fine in a minute. Anything hurt?"

"No..." Maura shook her head. "I just passed out...."

"No doubt as an effect of these bumbling idiots tactlessness. Forgive them, they're rather distracted with trying to save the world and all." Ginny grinned.

Maura immediately knew that she liked the other woman.

"Thank you," she said, sitting up. "I'm fine."

"Ginny, perhaps some Pepper-Up..." Harry started.

"Don't be daft, Harry! Giving potions to muggles without knowing their resistance level is about as smart as poking a twitchy auror with a stick. A shot of that muggle brandy that you keep hidden in the bottom drawer would probably do her as much good as anything I could give her."

Harry immediately moved behind the large desk in the corner and took out a bottle of amber liquid. He poured a generous shot into a crystal glass on the desktop and then brought it across to them, handing it to Maura.

Maura drank, surprised to find that it was a very smooth, obviously very expensive brandy. She lowered the glass, then took a deep breath.

"I have some questions, Mr Potter."

Harry grinned, "No doubt you do, Miss Kennedy. And I'll be happy to answer as many of them as I can, but I need to make a few things clear to you before we proceed, if I may?"

"Of course," she nodded.

"The world that you have read about, the magical world that is in the books about my...escapades at Hogwarts...are only based on fact. Many of the details are...pure fantasy. You do understand that?"

She nodded once.

"Many of the things that the author wrote about are...interpretations...of the real events."

This was met with a snort from Ron.

Ron. Ron Weasley... Maura turned shocked eyes on him, only just realizing who he was.

"You....you're Ron Weasley...."

"Yes," he nodded, looking directly at her, his blue eyes twinkling. "But I'm not nearly the git that I was made out to be in the books."

At this, Nymphadora Tonks snorted, then went back to swinging her feet from the corner of the desk.

She turned to find Harry watching her closely. He looked to be about thirty five years old. He had the messy black hair, and the deep emerald eyes...but he didn't wear glasses, and he certainly didn't bear much resemblance to the scrawny kid he had been described as. He was, she thought, close to six foot two or three...very tall and quite broad about the shoulders. He wore a grey tshirt and a pair of well-worn jeans. No wizard robe in sight.

"The books were, as you said, a story...a fantasy story written for children. I don't know how much you know about the author of those books...."

"Only what I've read in interviews," she said softly.

"Yes. In one particular interview, she mentioned that the character of Harry Potter just walked into her mind, fully formed, while she was on a train journey...."

"Yes, I've read that."

"What she didn't mention, actually, what she didn't know, was the manner in which the character was presented to her. The headmaster at Hogwarts was also on that train. He felt it was time that someone wrote my story...and presented it to her...through..." he took a deep breath, "...well, through what you would call mental telepathy."

"Dumbledore?"

"Yes. Albus Dumbledore," Harry smiled. "This was back in 1990. While the books are presented as my graduating from Hogwarts in 1997, I actually graduated ten years prior to that, in 1987."

"And how much of the story is true?"

"Well..." Harry smiled again. "Lets just say that most of the major events are correct in theory."

"What does that mean?"

"Miss Kennedy, I don't have the books in front of me to tell you item by item what is fact and what is...artistic license. Suffice to say that the basic elements of the tale are there. The author was given the story as Albus knew it...and as any good author with an idea would do, she elaborated on the main facts to make a marketable, entertaining story."

"Did you kill Voldemort?"

Harry stilled, then took a deep breath. "Yes. I did."

"So you abolished the Dark Lord. You were the victor. What do you need me for?"

"You believe that there is only one source of evil in the world, Miss Kennedy?"

"You mean that there is another...?"

"There is always another," he confirmed. "There is always one more to take the place of the one defeated. Trust me on this."

"And this one?"

"No worse has been seen since...well. Perhaps you remember in the books that my...mentor, Dumbledore, defeated his own Dark Lord some sixty years ago."

"Grindewald, yes." She confirmed.

"Your world knew him as Adolf Hitler." Harry nodded. "Voldemort never reached that level of power. He was capable, it just hadn't occurred to him to try to overcome the...forgive me...muggle world concurrently with his attempted takeover of the magical world. Had it occurred to him, it might have been a much harder struggle to overcome him. However, the latest rising of a Dark Lord has come in a form that both our worlds must take note of. Another has come in a long line of Dark Wizards, who would overtake not only our world, but yours, as well."

"Who?" she asked faintly.

"We don't know his name. But we know a few things about him...."

"What?"

"He is from the middle east, and he practices a Dark Magic that even our world has been unable to comprehend. Many of the so-called 'terrorist' attacks in recent years have an unmistakable magical signature."

His emerald eyes glinted as he stared deeply into her blue ones.

"The magical world is frightened, Miss Kennedy. Very, very frightened. We do not know if we are strong enough to overcome this threat. And this time, they threat is not just to us. Your world, too, is involved."

"What does this mean?"

"It means that not since 1939 have we seen a threat such as this to both our worlds. That time, our people banded together to overcome. Albus Dumbledore could not have overcome Grindewald without assistance from both wizards and non-magical people. Since that

time, your world has lived in relative peace. However, we now face a similar threat, and this time, we have no name or face for the Dark Lord. At least, not yet."

He hesitated, and she suddenly knew that he had his own suspicions.

"What do you need me for?"

"To assist in uniting our worlds. You must be the key, the connection, the liaison, if you will, which allows us to communicate and form alliances with the non-magical world. You must help us to convince others of your kind to band together with that that they have no concept of...that they believe merely children's fairytales and fantasy fiction."

"How?"

He paused, looking directly into her eyes. His were incredibly sad, but hopeful.

"You must convince them to give us their children."

A/N – Okay, I forgot the disclaimer on the first chapter, but it should be obvious that I own nothing. JKR is my hero – and I'd really, really like to be like her (rich, famous, talented, beautiful...etc.) ...but I'm not so far gone that I believe I AM her, so don't sue me, okay?

Also, please read and review (I'd really appreciate ALL reviews!), but if you flame me, understand me when I say I am a natural redhead, and proud of it...and the Weasley temper doesn't have ANYTHING on mine. CQ

Chapter Two: The True Story

"You want me to...*what?*"

"You heard me, Miss Kennedy."

"But why?" she was confused. He really hadn't asked her to convince the non-magical world to hand over their children as some sort of... sacrifice to this war?

"To be trained."

"A children's army? Are you insane?"

"It has been suggested, but no, I don't believe I am," Harry smiled at her. "Try to understand..."

"Oh, I *am* trying! In case you aren't up on your European history, a children's army marching to the Middle East has been tried before, you know. It didn't exactly work out as planned!"

"Please, I know this sounds odd..." Harry sighed. "It sounds a damned sight more than odd, actually. But please, just listen for a moment."

She quieted, then watched him expectantly.

"The year that children of our world turn eleven, they move on to a higher level of education. Up to this point, for the most part, they are home educated. The reasons for this are many, but most of all, we do

not want our children to be...corrupted by the non-magical world. In your world, children are taught to 'grow up' and stop believing in things that are considered... well... silly, childish. That childish belief in magic is natural to all children. The difference is that our children are never taught to NOT believe. It's a very important element. That is why *some* muggle children are able to adapt their natural magical abilities – where others would simply dismiss it and stop using it.

"Some of these children are selected for a very exclusive education. Places like Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, Durmstrang...there are nine exclusive wizarding schools worldwide. Many more wizarding children go to community schools, or are home taught.

"Despite what the books say, there are *very* few muggleborns in schools like Hogwarts. This is not because of some silly prejudicial view on bloodlines. The fact is, muggle children are losing their ability to train their magic at a younger age these days. Your children have lost their innocence. This is something that in the wizarding world, we guard viciously. It is our children's one great strength, after all.

"This is not to say that it doesn't happen. It's more of a nurture versus nature thing. All children have magical ability – it just seems that if it is not encouraged at an early age, as comes naturally in a wizarding household, it gets left behind.

"Most of the muggleborn wizards and witches were, in fact, raised in homes where their curiosity and natural creativity were encouraged. This seems to have a great effect later on magical ability.

"If we can source muggle children who have *not* been discouraged, we may be able to train many more than we would otherwise be able to. Even if it is in basic charms and spells – even if it is just defensive spells. Imagine the difference we could make – how many lives might be saved..."

"But if we train adults to use..."

"I don't know if adults could be trained. I don't know if it's even possible. Every year in age takes away more of the likelihood that they can believe enough, that their minds are open enough to accept what must be taught."

Harry looked at her, his eyes so very sad...but determined. She could feel an electrical charge coming off of him, he was obviously feeling very strongly about this.

"We need the children. They will be our strongest chance."

Maura thought for a moment, then nodded, quickly, decisively. Harry let out a breath that he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Fine," she said. "But I want to know."

"Know what?" he asked.

"I've read the books. You're telling me that they are mostly fiction... I want to know the true story, what really happened. I have questions."

"Of course you do," Harry sighed, but he was smiling. "You're a reporter, right?"

"Did they really refer to you as 'the boy who lived'?" she asked straight out after a moment of thought.

Harry seemed surprised by her first question, but settled into his chair, getting comfortable. He knew, from his interviews with Rita Skeeter over the years, that this would take a while.

"Among other things, yes."

"Did you really only find out you were a wizard when Hagrid came for you?"

"There is no Hagrid, and I wasn't a wizard until I graduated Hogwarts."

"What?"

"Hagrid doesn't exist. Albus Dumbledore came for me. My aunt and uncle raised me, knowing nothing of the magical world. My mother was a muggle, not a famous witch. My father was a wizard, but I don't know if my mother knew or not. Perhaps at the end. You can't really be attacked by Death Eaters and not know something is up.

"My parents were killed by Voldemort in an attempt to get to me. There is... was... a prophecy. I was destined to be Voldemort's downfall.

"In 1980, when I was eleven years old, my aunt and uncle received a letter, inviting me to be a student at Hogwarts. When they learned that it was a boarding school in Scotland, they assumed that they could not afford the fees and simply dismissed it. I was slated to go to the public school in the village.

"Were they abusive... cruel to you?" she asked softly.

"They were... inattentive. My cousin was born to them late in life, and they doted on him. He was... difficult. They had a lot on their hands with him. My presence in their home was insignificant."

"You didn't live in a cupboard under the stairs?"

He smiled ruefully, "No. But I did work hard, which only managed to instill a strong work ethic in me, and the belief that you get nothing for nothing. I wasn't used to... affection, and it was no great loss to me, or them, when we parted ways."

"Is there a Diagon Alley?"

"Yes. I will take you there tomorrow, if you wish."

"Is there a Hogsmeade?"

"Yes, although it isn't called that. It is protected by many charms and spells to keep it from being discovered by the... non-magical community."

"The Dursleys..."

"Before you begin searching out every Dursley in England, let me tell you that their names were changed in the writing of the book. I can only suppose that the author didn't want any... difficulties, shall we say, with real people recognizing themselves in her stories. Also, my cousin's name wasn't Dudley....although he was a bully."

"Was?" she picked up on that quickly.

"There isn't really a restriction on underage magic, either," he smiled. Maura nearly laughed. Harry Potter obviously had a wonderful sense of humor.

"So, when Dumbledore came for you..."

"My aunt and uncle were hesitant to let me, at eleven years old, leave with a complete stranger who looked like something out of a King Arthur tale, much less let him take me away to Scotland to a school that no one in the muggle world had apparently heard of. They were, well, suspicious, to say the least."

"I can imagine."

"Dumbledore convinced them that he was who he said he was. I can only imagine how, as I wasn't allowed to be party to the conversation. Nevertheless, I paid an unexpected visit to Diagon Alley that day, and then ended up in Kings Cross Station on my way to boarding school in Scotland."

"Is there a platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$?"

"Of course."

"Do you access it by walking through a wall?"

"Not exactly," Harry grinned. "Suffice to say that those who are meant to be on the train find their way to the appropriate platform, and those who are not, are pretty much oblivious to what is going on around them."

Harry was still smiling. He was enjoying this conversation, perhaps more than he had enjoyed any conversation in a long while. Maura Kennedy had a very sharp mind, and he was very much enjoying her questioning. She certainly wasn't asking the questions he had expected.

"The Hogwarts Express leaves Kings Cross Station at eleven in the morning on September the first, like clockwork?"

"Well, the transportation that is commonly referred to as the Hogwarts Express leaves from Kings Cross Station. All those expected to attend Hogwarts are expected to be there by eleven in the morning on the first of September."

"You're being evasive," she accused.

"I know," he responded. *This is like duelling*, he thought, *only with words*. "But the mode of transportation to the school has very little to do with what we are doing here, now."

"Fine, for now." she responded. She looked over at Ron Weasley, who was reading a book in a chair in the corner. As if sensing her regard, he looked up, his intense blue eyes sparkling. To her surprise, he winked at her. At that moment, she knew he was no more reading than she was... he was very much listening to their conversation. She looked around to find that they were the only three in the room. Apparently, the others were not interested enough in their conversation to stay.

"You met Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger on the Hogwarts Express the first year."

"Yes."

Maura thought for a moment, then smiled. "Is there any such thing as a chocolate frog or Bertie Botts Every Flavour bean?"

Harry laughed outright, "No, there isn't. However, some wizard shops sell sweets that are not available in the muggle world."

"When the sorting hat told you you were in Gryff..."

"There is no sorting hat. We were sorted based on our academic achievements to that point and a rather intense round of personality tests. We were given our house information before arriving at the school."

"No sorting ceremony?"

"No. Although there was a rather spectacular feast, as I remember it. That, however, could very well be my memory playing tricks on me. Food had never been in much abundance at my aunt and uncle's home."

"It was a bloody amazing feast, Harry." Ron's voice spoke up from the corner.

"Yes, I rather remembered it that way." Harry thought for a moment. "I remember eating until I felt like throwing up. Everything tasted so incredibly good, and it was endless."

"Co-ed dorms?"

"Absolutely," he grinned again. Ron snorted in the corner.

"Draco Malfoy..."

"What about him?" Harry's grin was suddenly gone.

"Does he exist?"

"Oh, yes."

"He's your nemesis?"

"I wouldn't call him that. He was more of an...irritant."

"He was a right pain in the ass, you mean!" Ron said from the corner.
"Annoying little git..."

"And did Mad-Eye Moody really change him into a ferret?"

"Not much of a change, that." Ron piped up.

"No," Harry's sparkling eyes danced over to his friend and back. "He merely made him... bounce."

"Did you save the Philosopher's Stone in your first year?"

"Such as it was, yes."

"There really is a Philosopher's Stone?"

"Was. Yes. It was later destroyed."

"And the things you had to get past to get to it?"

"All there. And before you ask, Quirrell was possessed by Voldemort, and he had... well, the turban was in place for a good reason. The Mirror of Erised was there. That scene in the books is quite accurate, actually."

"What about the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Pretty accurate."

"Except that ruddy snake was more like two hundred feet long." Ron spoke again.

"Oh, and there was no Gilderoy Lockhart. I have no idea where he came from."

"Was Ginny Weasley really contacting Tom Riddle?"

"Yes," a voice spoke from the doorway. Ginny entered the room and sat down in a chair opposite Harry. "I was. And it was indeed through an enchanted diary. I have read that book, too. From my perspective, it's very accurate."

Maura turned to Harry, "And you saved her?"

"Well..."

"Yes, he did. If it weren't for Harry, I would have died in the Chamber."

"Can I see it?" Maura asked suddenly.

"See what?"

"The Chamber."

"It's been sealed," Harry said tightly. "Some students tried....well, it's been permanently sealed. Even I can't access it."

"And later? Did you set Dobby free by tricking Lucius Malfoy into giving him one of your socks?"

"There is no Dobby. There are no such things as house elves." Harry said quietly.

"And it's been a good many years since anyone was stupid enough to try to pull one over on old Lucius," stated Ron dryly.

"Maura, many of the magical creatures featured in the books don't exist. Some do, but they are few. Any that are presented as 'common' certainly aren't real. Goblins and centaurs for instance. House elves."

"And Sirius Black?"

"You're not serious!" Ron laughed. "Come on, 'Sirius', the Dog star?"

"I have no godfather," Harry said, amused. "At least, that I am aware of. There was no 'prisoner of Azkaban', unless you count Peter Pettigrew, who was indeed the person responsible for giving up my parents to Voldemort's minions. He went to Azkaban for that. I believe he was released that year, but he went running back to Voldemort. So far as I know, he wasn't an animagus, nor was he ever Ron's pet."

"Perhaps," Maura was rather overwhelmed. "Perhaps you could just tell me what *did* happen? Starting, of course, with your third year?"

"Nothing much happened in third year," Harry frowned, trying to remember. "The ministry was becoming a bit of a pain, and I remember Cornelius Fudge held some inquiries that year into things he should have just stayed out of, but overall, our third year was pretty uneventful."

"We spent too bloody much time in detention with Snape to get up to anything," Ron stated from his corner. "No, third year was quiet. It was the next year that all hell broke loose."

"The Triwizard Tournament."

Ron laughed uproariously, "Yeah, that."

"What?" Maura asked.

"Look, Maura," Harry leaned forward in his seat. "It's all about creative license. None of what you read is really... well, it's all *based* on actual events, but..."

"Harry," Ginny spoke. "Why don't you just tell Maura what you remember and allow her to interpret it?"

Harry nodded. "Well, in our fourth year, we had an inter-school exchange. It wasn't a Triwizard tournament. I have no idea... well... anyhow. While we were playing host to two groups from the other European schools, we had a... well, I suppose you could call it an inter-school competition."

"But no dragons, right? They don't really exist," Maura offered.

"Oh, they exist," Ron laughed. "But you'd have to be around the bloody bend to let one, much less four, within a hundred miles of a school full of half-trained kids... or you might call it a ruddy buffet."

"Dragons do exist, Maura, but no one would be stupid enough to involve them in a competition. The competition as it happened that year was for a prize...a goblet full of gold. The goblet wasn't portkeyed. Cedric Diggory and I weren't transported anywhere. The confrontation with Voldemort happened on the school grounds."

"Tell me."

Harry sighed. "I entered the competition on a dare. It was stupid, but you know that the members of Gryffindor house are selected in part on their supposed bravery...well, mine had been called into question by someone who I didn't like very much, and being fifteen, and full of hormones, and and idiot to boot, I put my name in. It was only supposed to be for 17 year olds and up, but somehow the judges missed the fact that I was only fifteen."

"Wanted to see what the boy who lived could do, the stupid gits," Ron grumbled. "You should never have been there."

Harry smiled, "You say that now, Weasley, but that isn't what I remember you saying when I got my duelling schedule."

"Well, I was fifteen, too. We were both stupid, hormonal teenagers."

"The competing was done in the form of a wizards duel. Each duel was judged by a panel of aurors from the Ministry. At the end, they decided the final duelling schedule by points. The two top point scores dueled, and the two bottom point scores dueled. Then the two winners were to duel for the prize. Victor Krum and I were the two top duelists. While watching our duel, Cedric Diggory was hit by a curse meant for me."

"Victor Krum killed Cedric?"

"No. An official from Durmstrang...it was assumed that he had been put under the Imperious curse...there was no way to tell afterwards."

"That was a suicide mission if ever I saw one." Ginny stated.

"Every auror from the Ministry there, and he's sent to take out Harry? Bloody right, it was a suicide mission."

"You killed him?"

"No. When he missed me, he tried again, and was... well, forty separate stunning spells taken all at the same time has much the same effect as any killing curse. Voldemort knew that anyone attempting to eliminate me in that arena would be in the middle of a very bad place, even if they succeeded. Surrounded by Ministry officials and aurors, and several hundred nervous, half-trained, pissed off and scared students...well, it wouldn't be very smart for him to send in a Death Eater. He got hold of one of the minor officials from our brother school in Eastern Europe and...we assume it was the Imperious curse. Any of his Death Eaters that are suitably high up to be willing to walk into an almost certain death situation to do his bidding had far more knowledge than Voldemort could risk, if somehow they were caught and questioned."

"And Cho?"

"Cho Chang? What about her?"

"The whole thing with Cedric?"

"She was never with Cedric, really. She just..."

"She just needed an excuse to get near Harry." Ron stated. "And was the type to use just about anything, even pity, to get there."

"It was over before it started, Ron. And it was twenty years ago."

"Where is she now?"

Ron and Ginny froze, then glanced nervously at each other. Harry studied his clasped hands before he looked up at her.

"Voldemort...assumed she was important to me. It's unfortunate that his informants were mistaken."

"So you didn't face Voldemort directly in your fourth year?"

"Oh, yes, he showed up. We had a bit of a difference of opinion. He didn't expect me to be as strong as I was, and he ended up leaving before it got too far along."

"Harry kicked his ass in a duel behind the school while everyone was distracted with Cedric." Ron clarified. "He's a bit modest, our Harry."

Harry continued to study his hands, silent.

"And then?"

"Then I told him I would kill him or die trying, that nothing would ever stop me until one of us was the victor, and he was through hurting the people I cared about. In that, at least, I was wrong. He took exception to my... determination. And left."

"And the next year? Professor Umbridge?"

"Oooh...." Ginny growled. "That woman!"

"Most of what is in that book, about fifth year, is reasonably accurate. Close enough to not matter, anyhow. However, this house never belonged to the Black family, there is no screaming portrait, Sirius never existed and Remus is not, nor has he ever been, a werewolf."

"But he sure is amused by the fact that he is in the books," laughed Ginny. "And he is a bit of a wolf, at times!"

"So...."

"They don't exist, Maura. Nor do vampires...at least in the form that the muggle world thinks of such things."

"Harry, I'm getting the impression you're not too..."

"Thrilled? You're right. I never wanted any of this. I'm not particularly thrilled that I not only have to face a lifetime of being 'the boy who lived' in the wizarding world, but that my fame precedes me into the muggle world, as well."

"Then why?"

"Albus was..." Harry started, then stopped.

"Dumbledore was determined that Harry's story be told in the muggle world," Ginny said when it was clear that Harry wouldn't, or couldn't, continue. "He said something at the time about needing to set the stage. He didn't exactly...consult Harry."

"Ah," Maura suddenly understood. "Well, he was right."

"What?" Harry looked up at her. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean, Harry, is that there isn't a kid in the Western Hemisphere who wouldn't die a thousand deaths for the opportunity to become a wizard...just like Harry Potter. That is what we want, isn't it?"

Chapter Three: The Order of the Phoenix

"You may be right," Harry stood. "But it's late. Perhaps the rest should wait until morning."

"I can...how do I get home?" Maura asked, suddenly aware that she had no idea of where she was. "Where, exactly, am I?"

"You're still in London, but it may be more convenient for you to stay here tonight, if you have no objections?"

"I...well..." Maura was confused for a moment. "I don't have anything with me."

"Nightclothes, and a change of clothing for tomorrow, and anything else you might need can be provided."

"That's fine, then." Maura agreed. She was surprised at herself, she seldom chose to stay anywhere but her own home, when she could. Her flat was her bolt-hole, a place where the rest of the world just didn't exist. She dearly needed a bolt hole right now, but she was perfectly comfortable staying in Harry's home.

"Ginny?" Harry turned to the red head. "Could you show Maura to her room and see to her needs?"

"Of course, Harry." Ginny smiled. "You won't be far behind, I hope? You need your rest."

"I know," he leaned down as she passed and gave her a small kiss on the cheek. "Now, go take care of Maura. She needs it right now."

"And you don't?" Ginny asked, but Maura thought perhaps he didn't hear, because he immediately turned to Ron, the women seemingly forgotten.

Ron watched closely as the two left the room. As the door closed behind them, Harry slumped into a chair and Ron cast a quick silencing charm.

"You okay, mate?" He asked cautiously. Ron knew that in times of great stress, it was unpredictable which way Harry's temper would go.

"Yes, I'll be fine."

"We can go back, you know. A sleeping draught, and obliviate charm, and she's none the wiser."

"And the prophecy, Ron? What then?"

"I don't know, Harry. But this one's got you deep, and I hate to see you like this."

"Our entire world relies on our ability to do this. I know what she's in for. I have essentially asked her to throw away her entire life."

"Not all of it."

"She might as well..."

"Harry, sometimes we have to form alliances with the muggle world. To do that, we need to have contacts there. Just because she's up to her neck in it right now, doesn't mean that she always will be."

Harry stared into the fire. "What if she is, Ron? What if she chooses to be? You know the consequences for her."

"Not much we can do there, mate. Gotta let it play out. I figured you, at least, had that figured."

"Yes. You can't change a prophecy. No matter how hard you try. It always manages to happen anyhow, somehow."

"Right, mate."

"So why," he turned to his friend, his *best* friend for the last twenty four years, "Why do I feel like I'm murdering Maura Kennedy?"

The next morning, Maura awoke to hear a soft knocking on her door.

“Yes?”

“Maura? Are you up?” Ginny's voice came through the oak slab.

“I'm awake.” she confirmed, flinging her legs over the side of the bed and rubbing her eyes.

“Breakfast in ten minutes. Harry needs to speak to you.”

“Thanks, Ginny. I'll be right down.”

She gazed around the room. It looked different in the bright sunlight than it had the night before by the dim light of the bedside lamp. There was very little ornamentation, it was obviously a guest room. One single bed, a bedside table with a lamp, a small wardrobe, and two doors: one to the hallway and one to the shared bath next door.

She stood and headed towards the second door. A quick shower and she'd head down to speak to Harry.

Nine minutes later, she was jogging down the stairs to the front hall, still tucking her emerald green tshirt into the waistband, and tucking her short blonde curls behind her ears. The clothing had appeared on her bed while she was in the shower. She could only assume that Ginny had put it there.

Strangely, everything had fit perfectly, right down to the bra and panties. She knew that it couldn't be Ginny's, as she had a much more Rubinesque figure than Maura did, who often had likened her own figure to a twig with breasts.

“Good morning,” a deep voice startled her from an open doorway. “Ready for some breakfast?”

She smiled as Harry emerged from the room they had spoken in the night before. “Lead the way. Ginny said you wanted to speak to me, so I tried to hurry...”

“I didn't mean for you to hurry!” Harry glanced down at her. “Ginny is very much like Molly...sorry, Molly Weasley, her mother...”

"Yes. I know." Maura confirmed with a grin. "The books, remember?"

"Of course," he glanced away. "Molly is Ginny takes after her in that."

"Are you and Ginny..." she began, remembering the kiss from the night before. It had bothered her for a while last night, until she reminded herself that what Harry and Ginny did was none of her business.

"Ginny and I?" Harry's face showed true surprise. "Merlin, no! She's like my sister!"

"It's just..."

"I know what has been suggested in the books. That was all a very long time ago. Ginny married Dean Thomas. They had three children and twelve years together before he died."

"He died?"

"Dean was killed by Death Eaters five years ago. Defending Ginny and the girls."

"Oh, my..."

"Yes. Ginny came here to...well, to look after things for me, after that. The girls are all in Hogwarts now. Ginny is a trained mediwitch, but she's chosen to put that on hold for now. She's like a sister, and she's my friend. That's all."

"Are you married?" She asked before she could stop herself. What business was it of hers if he was married? Why did she care?

How on earth do you get eyes that colour? She thought, looking up into his intensely green eyes. *Was it magic? Or contacts?*

"No. I've never been...no. I'm not married."

"Ah...batting for the other side?" She was mildly disappointed. Darn....

"What?" Harry looked confused.

“She means, are you interested in women or the alternative, you dim git,” Ron said as he strode past towards, Maura assumed, the kitchen. “And I'd wager that she's the first bird in history to have to ask that of you, you randy bugger.”

Maura giggled. Ron had a very in-your-face kind of tact. She was really beginning to like him. She turned her eyes back up to look at Harry, and was surprised to see it turning a lovely shade of crimson as he watched his friend disappear through a door further down the hallway.

“No, I'm...” He seemed tongue-tied. “I mean...I'm not...I like women just fine.”

“Ah,” Maura nodded speculatively, then turned and followed the scent of bacon in the direction that Ron had gone.

A moment later, Harry followed her into the kitchen. “Ah? What do you mean, 'ah'?”

“Just 'ah',” she replied, sitting down to have Ginny place a plate before her.

“You don't just ask a bloke something like that, then just say 'ah' and walk away!” he grumbled.

“You don't?” she popped a piece of bacon into her mouth, refusing to make eye contact with him.

“No! You don't!”

“Well, I did.”

“Well... you can't!”

Maura leveled a look at him. A look that made it very clear what she thought of the word 'can't', as she chewed a mouthful of egg. Ginny really was a very good cook.

“Why not?”

“Because...well...because you just don't question someones...well... then walk away without explaining why you would be... interested.” Harry's face was deep red with embarrassment.

At least, she hoped it was embarrassment, and not anger. She suspected it wasn't a smart thing to tick off the most powerful wizard in the world.

“I'm interested, Mr Potter,” she said in a deadly calm voice. “Because you brought me here and involved me in this. You've told me that nothing is what it has previously been thought to be by people like me, and I thought that might extend to you. I really don't know any of you from... Merlin. Do I?”

“No...”

“And, if you must know, you're in your mid thirties, apparently reasonably successful, and with looks that could stop traffic. In *my* world, Mr Potter, that generally means one of two things: either you're already spoken for, or you're 'batting for the other side'.”

With this, she stood, placed her now empty plate on the counter and with great dignity, retreated to her room, where she collapsed on her bed, shaking with fear. She had just insulted someone who could, quite literally, kill her with a look.

Back in the kitchen, Harry sat, stunned, while Ron exploded with laughter and Ginny giggled into her coffee cup.

“Do people really think that of me? That I'm...”

“No, Harry,” Ginny giggled again.

“What did she mean....” Harry blushed, “never mind.”

“You mean the 'stop traffic' comment?” Ginny couldn't stop giggling. “She meant you're very shaggable, Harry.”

With this, she practically fell off her chair.

"She thinks I'm..." Harry looked horrified.

"Oh, mate....you really need to get out more," Ron laughed. "Sometimes I think we should have let Cho loose on you. Even Lupin has more of a clue with the ladies than you do!"

"But...she's..."

"She doesn't know that, mate. To her, you 're just some reasonably attractive bloke, single, with a pulse."

"Ron!" Ginny snapped. "I'm sure that that is *not* what she thinks!"

"But..." Harry was still trying to understand.

"Harry," Ron sat down across from him and leaned in, speaking as though he were addressing a three year old. "She's single, attractive, talented, and clever. And for some reason, she seems to think that you're not repulsive. This, mate, is a good thing. Okay, then?"

"Ron, she's...." Harry's eyes were wide as he looked at his best friend desperately.

"Oblivious to your faults, lad. Another good thing. Enjoy it."

Harry shook his head, "She had to *ask* me if..."

"She values clarity. Good thing." Ron nodded knowingly. "Women who value clarity are rare, Harry. Really."

"Hey!" Ginny's eyebrows lowered threateningly.

"Sisters don't count, Gin'," Ron didn't even look her way as he dismissed her.

"I'm still a woman, you thick git!" she grumbled as she stood to clear the table of their breakfast things.

"If she was fully aware of who..." Harry shook his head again. "She's not really interested in me. She just thinks she is."

"If you say that often enough, do you really begin to believe it?" Ron leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms on his wide chest.

Harry was tall, and broad, but Ron topped him by three inches and was half again as wide across the chest. The two men together made an imposing team. Ginny, however, was small, like Molly, but was able to cow them both with a look and a threatening sweep of a wooden spoon. Her bat bogey hexes were legendary, and she'd had twenty years to perfect them.

At that moment, two loud pops were heard and Ron and Harry turned from the table to see Fred and George enter the kitchen from the hallway.

"Harry! Ron! Ginny!" Fred walked in and sat down, "Good morning!"

"Any of that bacon left, love?" George peered over Ginny's shoulder.

"Go sit down, you. I'll bring you a plate."

"Not for me, Gin'," Fred called over. "Alicia fed me already once this morning. George, you do realize that people are starting to be able to tell us apart, mate? You could stand to skip that, lad."

"Never wanted to look like you, anyhow, you ugly git," George sat down as Ginny placed a plate with one rasher of bacon and some cut fruit. The look on his face was priceless as he looked up at his younger sister. "Ginny, love, what's this?"

"Angelina called, and told me you were on your way. She warned me not to feed you anything but fruit. The piece of bacon is to show you that I do love you, and have taken pity on you." She smiled sweetly as she turned back to the sink of dishes.

George swallowed, then smiled. "Thanks, Ginny."

"So, is she here, then?" Asked Fred, eying George's bacon.

"Yes. Upstairs." Harry said. "Now, remember, you two! She's here to do a job. There is not to be a word spoken about anything else, understand?"

"Absolutely, mate," said George, swatting at Fred's hand as it made towards his bacon. "She knows? About the prophecy?"

"She knows nothing more than what we have been told to tell her," Ron said in a low voice. "And it had best stay that way until Harry decides otherwise. Got it?"

"Cool your jets, little bro'," said Fred, leaning back in his chair. "Nobody's saying anything. How's she look?"

"She's..."

"Here." Ron stated in an undertone, turning towards the doorway. Immediately they all fell silent. A moment later, they heard her step. Ron's ability to hear things others couldn't had saved their collective backsides more than once.

All four men's eyes were on the doorway as she entered. Maura paused, her eyes moving between the two identical men seated with Harry and Ron at the table. Ginny was watching closely from the kitchen counter.

"Hello. Fred and George?"

The twins looked between Harry and Ron, confused.

"She's read the books, guys," Harry stood, gesturing for her to come forward and sit in the chair he'd vacated. "Come in, Maura. I was just going to call you down. Maura, I'd like to introduce Fred and George Weasley. Guys, this is Maura Kennedy."

"Nice to meet you," she said, holding out her hand to the first twin, who appeared to be somewhat heavier than the other.

"George," he said. "Pleased to meet you." Fred followed.

"Maura, please sit down. I need to...clarify some things." Harry's ears tinged pink. Fred sent an inquiring look to Ron, who snickered.

"Later," he mumbled to his older brother.

Maura, noticing the pink ears, sat.

"I've called a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix."

Maura sat straighter, then looked around, dawning recognition on her face. "This is Grimmauld Place, isn't it? Headquarters?"

"Well," Harry sat down next to her. "It's Headquarters, yes. But Grimmauld Place is just another one of those things that aren't really accurate. I don't know if such an address exists in London. If it does, I pity them. I'm sure that they get more than their fair share of visitors!"

"This house belongs to me, always has. You're in Potter Manor. It is the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, and my home. The other members of the Order will be here shortly. Fred and George are the first to arrive."

"How's business?" She grinned at them.

"Uh...fine?" Fred glanced at Harry, curious.

"Fred is an accountant, Maura. George runs a landscaping firm."

Maura shot Harry a look, "But what about..."

"It's part of the books. Nothing more."

"Oh." Maura was a bit disappointed in this.

"What in bloody hell are your two talking about?" Fred asked.

"Fred, the only knowledge of our world that Maura has is from the books that were written about it. She thinks that you and George run a joke shop in Diagon Alley."

"What?" Fred started to laugh. "You're kidding!"

"Your Hogwarts reputation precedes you, as well," Harry smiled.

"You know, Fred," George started. "We..."

“Not on your life, mate! I like being able to pay my bills every month. Besides, Alicia would kill me.”

Maura watched the exchange, unaware that two redheads in the room were watching her closely. Ron and Ginny suddenly caught each others' eye and a swift look was exchanged.

“I'm sorry,” Maura apologized. “I have to stop doing that.”

“What, exactly?” asked Ron.

“Making assumptions based on what I think that I know.” She smiled over at him.

“Ah, love, I think your instincts will do you just fine. You just need to learn to trust them,” Ron said cryptically, raising his coffee cup to her in salute before drinking deeply.

“So, Maura, many people will be arriving shortly...” Harry began.

“Sorry, do you want me to leave?”

“Leave?” Harry looked confused for a moment. “No, they're coming to meet you.”

“Why?”

“Because you've agreed to help us.”

“Oh,” Maura nodded. “Sorry. I didn't realize....”

“Of course not,” he smiled at her. “Tonks and Kingsley will be returning shortly...”

“Kingsley?”

“Kingsley Shacklebolt. You met him last night, with Ron and Tonks.”

“That was Kingsley Shacklebolt?” She said, shocked.

“Yes, sorry....I thought you knew?”

"No," she shook her head. "I mean...he seems so young?"

"About fifty, I guess. Why?"

"Well, he seems middle-aged in the books...."

"He wasn't thirty yet when I met him. Tonks is about forty, I guess. Does it matter?"

"Well, no...It's just surprising. When you read a book you...well, you get a mental picture of people, you know?"

"Yes," Harry smiled. "So, what else is different?"

"Ginny. Ron. The twins." Maura swallowed. "It's very disconcerting. The only think that is even close to how I imagined..."

"What?"

"You. You're exactly as I pictured you...only older and, well, larger."

"Larger?" Harry grinned.

"You weren't as tall, or as...well...muscular, in my minds eye."

"Ah."

"Ah?" she enquired with a smile.

"Now don't you start that again," he warned lightly, grinning again.

Twenty minutes later, they were surrounded by a large group consisting of Tonks, Kingsley, Neville Longbottom, Terry Boot, Katie Bell-Wood, Oliver Wood, and two more Weasley's: Bill and Charlie.

"Mum and Dad send their regards, Harry. Dad said he'd catch up with you on Monday," Bill said, eying Maura closely.

"Thanks, Bill. Did you check into that new light ward I asked you about?"

“Yes, it's done with a mirror charm...”

As Maura tuned out their conversation, she watched the others in the room,. Two more people apparated in, an elderly witch and a tall, thin wizard in dark robes. Something niggled in a corner of her mind. She should know who these people were.

Another two, younger witches apparated in, then two more wizards.

“Seamus! Lee! It's wonderful to see you!” called George from across the room.

The older witches eye caught hers and Maura thought she saw a moment of...something. At that moment a voice at her elbow startled her.

“Maura? You okay?” Ginny laid a hand on her arm.

“All these people...” she turned a smile on Ginny. “I've read of them, and they're real.”

“Yes,” Ginny smiled back at her, her brown eyes searching Maura's face intensely. Maura thought it odd, but then Ginny continued. “Are you okay, though?”

“I'm fine. Just getting accustomed to it. Ginny, who are those two? The elderly witch and the wizard with the black robes?”

“You mean you haven't figured that out?” Ginny's eyes danced. “That is Headmistress McGonagall and Professor Severus Snape.”

Maura drew in a short breath, then swallowed. That was it, then. She really was in...this place. She surreptitiously pinched her thigh. It hurt, but she didn't wake. She looked up into the twinkling blue eyes of Minerva McGonagall.

“Did it work?” the elderly witch asked quietly.

“I'm sorry?”

"It's only...I do it all the time," the elderly witch confided. "So often, in fact, that I end up with a bruise on my thigh. But I never wake up."

Maura smiled and blushed. "Was it that obvious?"

"Only to me," Headmistress McGonagall said. "And only because I know that feeling. Very, very well."

"You're Professor McGonagall. I'm very pleased to meet you. I'm Maura Kennedy."

"Are you now?" McGonagall studied her for a moment. "Mr you then?"

"You could say that," she smiled, glancing in Harry's direction to find him watching her closely. "He's very determined."

"You really have no idea," McGonagall said in a rather dry, resigned tone. "The times I chased that trio down...I'm amazed I'm still lucid at times."

Maura laughed. She liked this witch.

There were several loud pops as others apparated in.

"Ah, yes, I believe we are all here now, at least all who are expected. Harry, I believe it's time we moved into the War Room..." she moved towards away from Maura and towards the hallway.

"Yes, of course, Professor." Harry replied, heading towards the hallway and encouraging others along with him.

"Silly boy. Been out of school for nearly twenty years and still calls me that." McGonagall shook her head fondly, watching Harry through the group as he turned back and stepped toward them.

"Maura, before we begin, there is someone I'd like you to meet," he pulled her to the side to allow others to move past them.

He led her towards a middle-aged man standing off to the side of the kitchen. He was fiftyish, or maybe a little older, and wearing a pair of

faded jeans and a sweatshirt emblazoned with an Oxford University crest.

"Remus? Remus..." Harry approached and the man turned to shake Harry's hand.

"Harry, how are you?"

"Good, Remus. Very good. I wanted to introduce you to our guest. Maura Kennedy, Remus Lupin. Remus, this is Maura."

Remus looked at her oddly for a moment, almost as though he was trying to place her. He then thrust out a hand to shake, and smiled.

"Miss Kennedy, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"So, you're the non-werewolf?" She smiled, encouraged by the twinkling of his eyes.

"Ah, yes. You've heard, then." Lupin smiled self-consciously, a tinge of pink to his cheeks that hadn't been there before. "I must admit, I've benefited greatly over the last few years. I had no idea there were so many...curious...women."

"Remus, behave." Harry smiled, shaking his head.

"Ginny told me you were a bit of a wolf, despite what others say." Maura teased, liking this older man. She could tell he had a sense of humor, something that she hadn't considered before. Remus Lupin always seemed like such a tragic figure in the books.

The books. They were so very different, yet so very accurate. It was scary.

"Did she now?" Remus' eyes darted around the room, coming to rest on the youngest Weasley. "Now, that is good to know. The young lady in question has been avoiding me. Perhaps my unwarranted reputation has preceded me."

Maura laughed outright. No one here was truly as she had imagined them.

Chapter Four – The Prophecy

They moved into a room off of the kitchen, where a long table was surrounded by plushly upholstered chairs. Harry took Maura's arm and led her to the far end of the room, where he held out a chair for her. Maura smiled up at him before sitting down.

Were men in the wizarding world naturally more considerate? Or was it just this one? She glanced around the room to see several of the men helping the women present to sit down. Ron helped Ginny, while both Bill and Charlie assisted witches she hadn't been introduced to yet. Perhaps it was just the Weasley men and those that Molly Weasley had had influence over, she grinned, wondering if Harry had really become as close to Molly and Arthur and their family as the books suggested.

Harry was still standing, looking down on her short blonde curls, until Snape caught his eye. With a tinge of pink on his ears, he moved to his own seat at the head of the table.

"Everyone, thank you for coming, especially at such short notice," he spoke as everyone settled. "I've called this meeting to make an announcement. Information has been made available to me from the Department of Mysteries..."

There was a collective gasp around the room.

"A prophecy. It was concerning myself and several others. It concerns our future, that of the magical world, and also that of the muggle world.

"As many of you know, the Muggle world has been experiencing some terrorist activities. Several muggle nations have sworn to exterminate those responsible. What isn't commonly known is that all of the major terrorist attacks of recent years, including those in Bali, Madrid, New York, and Munich, have all displayed a magical signature."

More gasps. Maura looked around the large table, her eyes taking in the shock apparent on most faces. The only ones not showing such a reaction were those that, Maura assumed, were already party to the

information that Harry was giving them. Namely Ron, Ginny, Kingsley and Tonks, Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape.

"Harry, how..." Bill Weasley began.

"In a minute, Bill," Harry raised his hand. "Let me finish."

"When I was called to the Department of Mysteries, I was told that there was a prophecy concerning these events. The prophecy was concerning the principal person in the conflicts in the muggle world."

Harry paused, took a breath, then continued.

"The person involved is a wizard. A very powerful wizard living in the Middle East. People, we have a new Dark Lord, and he is more powerful than any ever before seen."

The sudden rise in conversation was deafening. All stopped abruptly as a slam was heard. Everyone turned to see Minerva McGonagall with her hand on the table.

"Quiet, everyone! Harry is not finished." She turned to look at the younger wizard. "Harry, what did the prophecy say?"

"It was very long and convoluted. Prophecies are never straight forward, are they, Professor?" Harry smiled ruefully at her.

"No, Mr Potter, they are not." She shook her head. "Go on, please."

"Well, several lines have to do directly with...well, just listen," he took a piece of paper out and unfolded it. He began to read:

A great dark snake in the East rises against all light.

Muggle and Wizard, man and child,

Only together will they prevail; alone, all will be lost to the dark.

All children must learn the ways of our world, the magic must no longer be held

by those of magical birth alone.

The one who will unite, writes alone, with death overhead. Her life, beginning and ending four times.

She alone can unite all to fight, the world of magic and non, for she alone knows both, and must choose again.

And when the third war for both worlds ends, she will take her rightful place by his side, to die together, as was meant to be, from the beginning of time.

Everyone in the room was silent. Ron cleared his throat, and watched Harry closely. Harry wondered how many of them truly understood.

"Harry," Charlie Weasley spoke quietly, glancing between Harry and Maura. "Does this mean what I think it means?"

Harry considered Charlie for a moment, his eyes full of sadness. Then, he nodded. "I don't know how many of you are familiar with muggle history, but the muggle world has experienced two, what it calls, World Wars. Wars that involved their entire world in some capacity or another. Should another major conflict arise, as my contacts in the muggle world advise me this could well turn into, it would be their third war. You all know how many wars we have had against the Dark. So this would qualify as a third war for both worlds.

"*'A great dark snake in the East'*, the muggle world is uniting against certain factions in the middle east, where they feel the terrorists are based. In our world, most of the dark wizards have come from the Slytherin house, or it's equivalent from the other schools, all of which have a snake or serpent in their crest. *'Rises against all light'* seems to suggest that this power will take on both worlds, as Grindewald did.

"The prophecy tells us that all muggles and wizards, adult and child, will fight. Along with other lines from the prophecy, we have interpreted this to mean that the wizarding world will take muggle children and attempt to train them in magic, at least in basic defense.

"The prophecy speaks of a woman of the muggle world. One who will unite our worlds, who writes *'with death overhead'*, I'd like to introduce you the Maura Kennedy, she is a foreign correspondent for

the muggle press. She is the one about whom the prophecy speaks. She will unite our worlds."

All hell broke loose. Everyone spoke at once, and Maura stared at Harry, dumbfounded. How on earth had he figured out it was her? How did he know it *was* her? It seemed like an awful long stretch to her, there were many female war correspondents in the muggle world.

"Please!" Harry shouted over the noise. "Please listen! We have much work to do. The prophecy tells us we will stand together or fall. We *must* unite with the non-magical world to accomplish this. We cannot do it any other way!"

"Harry," a deep voice spoke, calmly. "Who is it?"

Harry turned to look directly at the black-robed figure seated beside McGonagall.

"Severus, I don't know. Not for sure."

"Have you had...?"

"Yes. I know several who are in service to him, but I have yet to see his face."

"Who?" Snape asked, still calm.

"Malfoy, Nott, Goyle."

Severus nodded, as though he had expected this.

"Pettigrew." Harry stated quietly.

Several gasps echoed around the room.

"Wormtail?" Snape's head snapped up, looking Harry directly in the eye. "So he has surfaced again."

"I should have killed him when I had the chance," muttered Lupin.

"If the prophecy is accurate, Remus," the dark man spoke again, "you couldn't have. You probably wouldn't have accomplished anything more than getting yourself killed."

"Regardless," Harry said firmly, looking between the two men. "We know what must be done."

"Do we?" Lee Jordan spoke. "Do we really? How do we know, Harry? You've had your war, our war. We've all done...lost...so much! Why another, now?"

"Because we didn't finish it the last time, Lee." Harry turned, looking at the other Gryffindor. "Voldemort was killed, yes, but his followers, those who believed in him, many were left to retreat, and it now looks as though they have gathered their reserves and found a new leader...and frankly, this one makes Voldemort look like a boy scout."

Harry looked around the room, making eye contact with every witch and wizard in attendance. Exhaustion showed in every face. Most here had lost their childhood in the last war, his war. They'd never had the opportunity for a carefree youth, they'd been too busy fighting the Dark Lord, or preparing to fight him. Preparing to defend family members and strangers alike. Every single one seated here had lost loved ones, no wizarding family had been left untouched. Many had been decimated. Hermione Granger's parents had died a fiery death which had been reported as a house fire, but really had been a fireball the size of a bus hitting their home while they slept. Lavender Brown was the only member of her family left alive. Seamus had lost his father, his mother had been subjected to torture, and was now in St Mungos, probably never to recover.

Dean Thomas' entire family had been wiped out, as had Angelina and Alicia's – Fred and George's then-girlfriends whom they had later married.

Katie Bell-Wood had lost an older brother, and a younger sister. Oliver Wood's grandparents, all four, had been picked off all in the same night.

Lee Jordan had lost his sister, who was only six years old at the time, and who he had watched be tortured in front of him. The deatheaters

had hit him with a paralyzation spell before starting their nefarious work that night, and he had been forced to watch everything they did, unable to stop, or react to, any of it. Neville Longbottom's long-suffering grandmother had been given the Dementors Kiss and left for dead.

Harry made eye contact with Bill, Charlie, Ron, then Ginny. No, even the Weasley's had had their share of loss. Arthur had been attacked in the Department of Mysteries, and had survived only because Harry had had a vision. But Percy...

Well, Percy hadn't been so lucky. And Molly and Arthur, the entire Weasley family, still felt the pain of his loss. They had had their differences, and, in Harry's opinion, and Ron's, Percy had been a first-class stuffed shirt. But in the end, he had seen what was going on. It had been Percy who had notified the Order of what was really happening in the Ministry of Magic, and he had made the ultimate sacrifice to get that information to them. He had known full well that he couldn't get the information out without leaving a trail for the dark wizards to find. Voldemort had known exactly where the leak had happened. Percy's days had been numbered from the moment he made that choice, and he had known it, even if Molly and Arthur had been in denial.

And Dumbledore had done his best to hide him, but everyone knew that, no matter what manner of magic you used, if someone was determined enough, anyone could be found. Harry's entire life had been living proof of the Dark Lord's ability to find those he wished to find, no matter what measures were taken to protect them.

In the end, Percy had met his end with true Gryffindor bravery, walking out into the street and away from the safe house that he had been put into, because Ginny and Molly had been there with him, and he knew full well that the only way to protect them, the only chance they had, was if Voldemort found him before he found the house.

No one in the Order but Harry knew the full extent of his torture, because only Harry was capable of getting into the Dark Lord's mind, and vice versa. By that time, Voldemort had only limited ability to make Harry see what he wanted him to see, but he was determined

that Harry should be witness to Percy's pain. It had been horrible, and Harry still woke up, eighteen years later, sweating in the night, his mind's eye having replayed the scene over and over again while he slept.

He had shared the details, not all of them, with only three other people. Dumbledore, Snape, and Ron. Even then, he had left out the truly gruesome bits. Dumbledore and Snape were able to piece what he left out together, but Ron was mercifully, Harry hoped, oblivious. What Harry had shown him had been bad enough, Ron would never have thought to suspect that Harry had held anything back.

By mutual agreement, they had decided that Ron's family would never know that Harry had been witness to Percy's death. Molly would insist on seeing what Harry could show her, and Harry simply could not do that to her. He was quite sure, as was Ron, that it would kill her to witness what one of her children had gone through. So Harry carried the burden alone, and happily, knowing that this family that had been like his own since he was twelve years old did not need to know what he knew, or see what he had seen.

"This time," Harry said, his voice strong, and firm. "This time, we must either eradicate the Dark entirely, or accept that there will always be another willing to step up and lead. In which case, constant vigilance will be our only defense in future."

"And what about Maura?" asked a young witch. "How does she feel about this? Is she willing to help?"

"It's my world, too." Maura answered. "My world and yours will suffer. I've been to war, to muggle war. It's not pretty. I doubt that a wizard war will be any less gruesome, probably more so. But if it is what we must face to stop this, well, I'm no coward."

"A true Gryffindor," McGonagall said, smiling at her. "Yes, we may win this yet."

"Maura, you understand what the prophecy says, what could happen?" Bill Weasley asked.

"*Take her rightful place by his side to die together*'?" Maura smiled. "Well, it's not exactly subtle, is it? Or is it? It doesn't say when, just after the third war. Could be the next day, could be a lifetime. No guarantees, but then, there aren't any guarantees in life, are there? It's just, well, doing the best you can with the time you've got, right?"

When the witches and wizards present understood that this woman, this muggle, was willing to fight, it seemed to change the feeling in the room. Suddenly, everyone wanted to begin making plans.

"The key," said Harry, "Is preparation. We must prepare every adult and child, wizard and muggle alike, to fight. We must expand Hogwarts, we must make contacts in the muggle community, and we must prepare to train many more than we have ever trained at one time before.

"I think that the primary focus must be Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions, with those who show any talent at all moving on to Transfiguration and Charms. More students means more teachers, anyone who is able must teach. Professors, I would appreciate it if you could come up with lists of your most able students over say, the last twenty years. We will have to contact them and arrange to have them prepare to take classes.

"In the meantime, Maura must do what she can to convince people in her world what is really going on." Harry turned his eyes to her. "It won't be easy."

She smiled, "Nothing every is, Harry."

The meeting went on for most of the day. By four o'clock, everyone knew what needed to be done immediately, and everyone had their tasks.

As people disappeared, Harry sighed and looked at Maura.

"You look tired," she said.

"So do you."

"I've never done anything like this before. It's exhausting." She had been very impressed with his ability to take charge of the room and keep people focused on the task at hand. She'd never really seen him as anything but the person who must do the final act in the battle against Voldemort in the book. This was a person, with talents and skills that perhaps, had only been gained because of that other experience in his life.

"I have done this before, and you're right, it is exhausting," he smiled at her. "Why don't you go and have a nap until dinner is ready?"

"Are you going to?" she asked.

"No. Ron and I have things to discuss."

"Can I...?"

"No. You need to rest. Go and lie down and we can speak after dinner."

She considered this for a moment, then spoke. "You're the head of the Order, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"What happened to Dumbledore?"

Harry stiffened, then sighed. "He died in the final battle against Voldemort."

"Voldemort killed him?"

"Indirectly."

Her eyes narrowed, "Who killed him, directly?"

"Someone," said Harry, "who wasn't Voldemort. Now go have a nap."

"Ron is your general, isn't he?"

"We don't have distinctions such as that in Dumbledore's Army."

"Ah, the DA...."

"Yes."

"And here I thought it was called the Order of the Phoenix."

"That was who was here today. Dumbledore's Army is much larger."

"But Ron is your..."

"Second in command? Yes."

"You trust him."

"With my life. With the lives of the people I care about."

"And he you?"

"I would hope so. He could. I would never betray him."

"What did Snape mean...?"

"Maura, go. Rest. We'll talk after dinner."

She smiled, then stood. "Very well, can I ask you for some paper and a pen? I have some things I want to get down..."

"Of course, in the drawer of the desk in your room."

"There is no desk in my room."

"There is now," he said, tiredly rubbing a hand over his face.

Maura shook her head and then went out of the room, and up the stairs. Sure enough, when she entered her room, there was a desk, a chair, and a lovely reading lamp. Someone must have moved it all in while they were in the meeting.

Of course, that didn't explain why the room was now six feet wider than it had been that morning.

"She suspects?"

"No, Ron." Harry rubbed his eyes.

"Don't assume, Harry. She's clever."

"She doesn't have a clue about this, Ron, trust me. Some of the questions she was asking... well, suffice to say that I know that if she had any idea then she wouldn't hesitate to question me."

"She's no coward."

"No."

The two sat in silence for a moment.

"You know, Harry, you have to stop blaming yourself."

"For what?" Harry scoffed. "For endangering her this way when I know it's the last thing she wants, if she really understood? Or for..."

"For Dumbledore's death." Ron cut him off. "You know as well as I do that he knew he wasn't coming back that day. He knew and he told you to remember what your priorities were. He told you that your concern had to be completely and totally Voldemort, and that people would be dying around you, but you couldn't let that stop you, or more would die."

"I should have..."

"No, Harry. He's been gone seventeen years. Let him rest."

"Does time assuage guilt, Ron?"

Ron considered for a moment, then spoke. "Do you blame Hermione?"

"What?" Harry turned to his friend, his disbelief at what he was being asked apparent on his face.

"You heard me. You blame yourself for not being aware, for having your attention on Voldemort and not being able to save Dumbledore. Do you blame Hermione?"

"How could I blame Hermione, Ron? She was..."

"She killed him, Harry."

"She was under the Imperious curse!"

"Yes. And she cried like a baby as she did it, Harry. She knew what she was doing, but could do nothing to stop herself. Do you blame me?"

"For what?" Harry was incredulous.

"For not stopping her. You know that I saw it all happen. You know that I was right there, beside her. If I'd leveled my wand at Hermione instead of Bellatrix, I could have saved Dumbledore. Do you blame me for not doing that?"

"No."

"Then why blame yourself?"

"Because we lost them both that day, Ron, and sometimes, it feels almost... sometimes it's very hard to face a day with neither of them in it."

"I know, Harry. Merlin, I know. But we have to do this. For Fred's kids, and George's kids, and Ginny's, and... Harry, I don't want them to have to do what we've had to do! Hermione wouldn't have wanted that, either. But we can't do it without you. And while you're focused on the past, and our losses, we can't move forward. We can't fight."

"This time, we have to do it without Dumbledore's power. Without his knowledge. This time, we have *you*, Harry. You're the most powerful wizard of our time, and that includes this new Dark Lord. Harry, you do things with *thought*. You wave your hand, and the world changes. It took you two hours to do what the Ministry has been trying to do for years, find Maura Kennedy. So accept your power, and accept that

others are going to die, and lets take care of this problem so that our kids don't have to."

Harry looked into the face of the best friend he'd ever had, and knew that he was right.

"You're absolutely right, Ron. Let's get this done, once and for all."

A/N -- well, there is another one. Two in two days, I must be on a roll! I have to say, though, that I'm really enjoying this!

So review! Good, bad or indifferent, I really want to know what the reactions are!

James Milamber: Thanks, I tried to put a lot of thought into his character -- I think it's a combination of what I think he'd be like at 35 and what I wish he would be like...hopefully it's accurate. Ron was a bit of a challenge, as I think he's a lot more intelligent than we often see -- I tried to get this across in a believable way. And Gred and Forge may have come as a surprise, but I wanted to really try to make it believable that the magical world really COULD exist and could be so ordinary that we don't recognize it for what it is, that JKR's books are merely one interpretation of what might really be there -- and JKR was merely the one chosen to be gifted with the telling of this alternate reality. Call it my little fantasy! And just to let you know, I started out fully intending to make it a H/G story, but my muse seemed to have an entirely different idea!

CQ

Chapter Five: Maura's Magic

When Maura came down for dinner, she was determined. She had laid on her bed, but she hadn't slept. She had thought, though. A lot. About the meeting, about the prophecy, about a lot of things, and she had questions for Harry.

Dinner was simple. Ginny had prepared a chicken pie and a salad for them, and had quickly excused herself afterwards to floo to George's home to visit with Angelina for the evening. Maura, Ron and Harry retreated to the library afterwards, discussing plans. They had been sitting comfortably for an hour when Ron stood.

"I'm off to the Leaky Cauldron. I told Seamus and Neville that I'd meet them for a pint later. Why don't you and Maura come along?"

"We may later," said Harry, not rising from the large leather wingback chair he was seated in. "I believe that Maura and I have a few things to discuss first."

"Darned right we do, Mr Potter," she said.

"Fine, then. You know where we are." Ron stepped into the fireplace. In a flash, he was gone.

"So, Miss Kennedy..."

"I want you to try to teach me," she said quickly, before she could lose her nerve.

"What?" That stopped him.

"You said that you thought only children could be taught, because their minds are more open. Well, I'm a pretty open-minded kind of person. I want you to try to teach me. Call me a test case."

"Not a good idea," Harry said, standing and walking towards the windows, his back to her.

"Why not?"

"It just isn't, Maura."

"I don't accept that. Either you have a reason, or there is no reason to not try."

"Magic isn't... it can be very dangerous."

"That's why I'm asking you to train me."

"I'm not..."

"I could ask Ron."

"No!" Harry was horrified. Ron would think it a wonderful idea. Harry couldn't even begin to think about the trouble that might cause.

Harry turned, looking at her determined face. He watched as she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. It reminded him... well, it was better to not even begin to think about what it reminded him of. He certainly didn't want to go there, at least, not tonight.

"What is the problem, Harry? Either we try and I can't do anything, in which case, nothing is lost, or we try and I can do something..."

"Which is exactly why we aren't going to try!" he stated. Why did she have to be so *stubborn* about this?

"Harry, if I could be of some use..."

"You are, Maura. Your job is to liaise between our worlds."

"Think of how much more convincing I would be if I could prove that magic existed!"

"You have no idea..." Harry rubbed his forehead exasperatedly with his left hand.

"The Ministry doesn't regulate magic users. I know, Harry, because I asked Ginny."

"There is regulating and then there is regulating, Maura."

“But...”

“Do you realize how much trouble you can get into by even doing magic in front of a muggle? Actually teaching them...”

“But that is exactly what the Order is suggesting we do. Teach magic to people who would otherwise be considered muggles.

“Look,” she continued. “I probably won't even be able to do it. Just let me try.”

“Oh, you'll be able to do it,” Harry muttered. “That's what bothers me.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I...” he paused, realizing what he had said. “I can see the magic in you, Maura. You have an aura...”

“Then teach me what to do!”

Harry took a deep breath, looking into her eyes. How on earth did he get into this position? Why couldn't he have been born to a nice, normal, suburban muggle family?

He sighed, “You'll need a wand.”

“Diagon Alley?” She asked hopefully.

“No. Oh, no,” he said immediately. “Maura, no one can know about this. Do you understand? No one. Positively, absolutely, not a single soul.”

“But why?”

“Because I could get in more trouble than you would ever believe possible, that's why. Merlin! I can't believe I'm actually considering this...”

“Harry! Please!” she looked up at him, a hint of desperation in her eyes. “I feel... ever since you brought me here I feel, well, strange. Displaced. I want to be part of this world, Harry, but...”

Harry watched her closely, considering for a moment.

“Maura, you have to promise me that you will never, ever use it in any way that might be discovered. You can't talk about it... not to anyone. Not even Ron, or Ginny. You can't possibly understand the risk, so you'll have to promise me and tell me you'll trust me on this before I agree. Do you understand?”

Maura wanted to question him, but thought better of it. She did trust him, so there was no reason not to agree, right?

“If you tell me that that is the way it has to be, then I won't question you. But please, Harry, teach me. I feel....”

“I know, Maura. Trust me,” he swallowed. “Merlin, I could get in so much trouble for this. Very well...”

“Where will I get a wand?” she asked.

“I...” Harry walked over to his desk and removed a box from the bottom drawer. From it he took a beautiful wand. The color and texture of the wood...it actually seemed to glow. Maura reached out, then pulled her hand back, hesitating. She felt drawn to it.

“Harry?” Confused eyes met his.

“You can use this.”

“Whose is it?”

“It belonged to a very good friend who we lost during the battle with Voldemort.”

“Not...not Dumbledore?” she was shocked rigid.

“No,” Harry's eyes were on the wand. “No, not Dumbledore. Hermione Granger.”

Maura reached for the wand slowly. Harry held it out to her. He didn't know if what he was doing was right, but he knew he had to do it.

The moment the wand was in her hand, she sighed, then smiled.

"It feels warm," she said, looking down at it.

"Try this," Harry suggested, producing his own wand and doing a little swishing motion with it. Sparks flew from the tip.

Maura imitated his wand movement, and was surprised as a rainbow of sparks trailed from the tip.

"Wow..." her voice was hushed, "Just like the sparklers kids play with."

"A little more powerful than firework sparklers," Harry said. "Okay, first spell..."

He put a quill in the middle of the desktop and swished and flicked his wand, "Wingardium Leviosa."

She giggled, knowing that this was one of the first spells that first year students learned. The scene from the book, where Hermione corrects Ron's pronunciation came to her, and she laughed harder, but then collected herself and imitated his movement and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The quill shivered, then lifted several inches off the desk.

"Harry! Harry, I did it! Look!" she squealed. Immediately the quill exploded in mid-air.

"M...Maura! Watch how you wave that thing around, okay?" he grabbed her wand hand and held it still.

"Oh," she looked down to where he was holding her wrist firmly. "Sorry."

Raising her eyes to his, she felt a shiver of awareness. Harry Potter was a very handsome man. It was impossible to be this close to him, within inches of him, and not feel it.

"Harry?" She whispered.

“What are you doing to me?” His own voice was hushed. “I’ve never felt this way about...”

For a moment, she really thought he was about to kiss her. Every female instinct she possessed screamed that that was what was a moment away from happening.

And then he let go of her wrist and turned away.

“You’re a witch,” he said gruffly.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me...”

“Maura, I meant that literally. You can do spellwork. You’re a witch.”

“I’m a witch.”

“Yes,” he turned back to her, a rueful smile on his face as he looked her over. “You’re a witch.”

“Not a muggle.”

“No.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

“What’s next?” her eyes were sparkling with excitement. “What do we do next?”

“We go to bed,” he laughed, then blanched, his face went totally white, then totally red. It reminded her of the Weasley hair.

“Harry?”

“I mean... I... we each...” he swallowed and took a breath. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“I know,” she grinned. “But maybe I wish you did.”

He was speechless as he watched her leave the room. Thw sway of her hips told him she knew *exactly* what she was doing to him.

Witch.

A/N -- To my reviewers -- thank you so much!

Katherine Rose -- I think we've all wondered, maybe even wished for that....as for where it's going, you'll have to read on and see! I THINK I know where it's going, but my muse has been playing mind games with me....so you never know!

James Milamber -- I'm glad you think so, as that is what I'm trying for! Thanks for adding me to your list -- you have no idea of how good that makes me feel, as Mind Mage is one of my absolute favorites! Oh, and thanks for the tip -- I appreciate it, being new to this fanfic thing!

CQ

Chapter Six: People and Places

The Leaky Cauldron was a pub. Not really much of a pub, but a pub nonetheless. Maura had been in several just like it in past, in muggle London.

There were many people in it. There was loud music and lager on tap, and pretty girls with bare midriffs serving the many customers. It opened onto a busy street near Charing Cross, and Harry and Maura went completely unnoticed as they entered.

Harry raised his hand in greeting to the bartender as they passed.

“Hey, Harry! How are you, lad?”

“Great Sid, and you?”

“Not complaining, Harry, not complaining!” The cheerful man smiled and, nodding again, turned his attention to another customer.

“What happened to Tom?” Maura asked in an undertone.

“Tom?”

“The barkeep at the Leaky Cauldron in the books?”

“Ah, Tom,” he grinned.

Maura looked up into his dancing eyes and groaned. “Another one?”

“Afraid so. Sid and his brother Stan have owned the Leaky Cauldron and this muggle bar for as long as I can remember.” He led her to a door that had a small sign hanging on it that said 'Private' and, laying his hand against it, pushed.

And they were in a different pub. This one looked older, but was spotlessly clean. There was a huge fireplace at one end, and as Maura watched, a wizard appeared in it with a flash of green light.

“So, how does this work, then?” Maura asked, a little in awe.

“Sid and Stan own the Leaky Cauldron. They're brothers. Sid runs the muggle bar, and Stan runs the wizard bar.”

“But how do they keep the muggles out of this side of it?”

“The few who can actually see the door wouldn't be able to get through. If they tried to open it, it would appear locked. If they did get through, there is an illusion charm that makes them think they've walked into a broom closet.”

“Ah.”

“And this end,” Harry said as they walked through to a bright entrance, “opens onto Diagon Alley.”

They stepped out onto a busy street, with many people about. But strangely, no vehicles. Not even a bicycle. It reminded Maura of the area called The Shambles in the city of York, all pedestrian walkways and very, very old shops on cobbled streets.

People milled about, dressed in everything from muggle jeans and jackets to long flowing Gothically-styled robes. Maura saw one woman she would have sworn was Galadriel from the movie version of Lord of the Rings.

“Harry?” She edged closer to him, a bit uncomfortable in these surroundings.

“It's okay, Maura. Really, you're safe.”

“I know. It's just...”

“I know. It can be a bit intimidating if you're not used to it.”

“How do you keep all this hidden?”

“Well, there are a lot of spells to keep it from view. That, and most muggles see only what they want to see, anyhow.”

“Have there ever been any unexpected guests?”

“You mean, a muggle wandering in accidentally?”

“Yes.”

“Not that I know of,” he grinned. “But I suppose it's possible. The biggest risk for keeping it secret is those muggles who need to know of it's existence so they can access it for their children who have been selected to go to Hogwarts. Very strong charms are put on the families of muggleborns. They quite literally cannot talk about it. Even if they try, they forget all about what they were about to say for a few minutes, and by that time, the subject has normally changed.”

“So what about...”

“I'm not really an authority on security like what they have here. Bill Weasley would be able to tell you, but of course, then he'd have to obliviate you.”

Maura turned stunned eyes on him, to find him laughing.

“A joke, Maura, just a joke.” He smiled, putting his arm around her shoulder and guiding her forward. “Relax, and let me show you around Diagon Alley.”

He took her up one side of the street and down the other. They visited Gringotts which, to Maura's eye, looked like any bank in the muggle world, except you could tell from the marble floors and highly polished wood wickets that it had been there a very long time. The bank tellers, however, were human, not goblins, and Harry laughed when she asked about exchange rates.

“I don't know, and I really don't care. I pay my bills in English pounds sterling, just like everyone else.”

“But you have your own currency?”

“Yes, but it's seldom used anymore. You can use English currency anywhere in the wizarding world.”

“So, no galleons, sickles or knuts?”

“Oh, they exist, and they can be used in wizard shops. Most people prefer to use muggle money, though. That way, they don't need to remember what to use where.”

“So, there aren't any vaults, either?” Maura was mildly disappointed. She'd hoped to talk Harry into taking her for a ride down to the vaults.

“I would imagine they have vaults here, but I doubt you get to them via a roller coaster. I've certainly never seen them. I have been in the safety deposit vaults, but they're just one floor down, and you can take the elevator.”

Maura smiled at his teasing, but still felt mildly disappointed.

Next, they visited Flourish and Blotts, a bookstore that looked very much like a Barnes and Noble, only the titles of the books were a bit curious. They had an entire section cordoned off from the rest, dedicated to books required by Hogwarts students.

Maura walked along the shelves and smiled as she saw *Hogwarts: A History*. Removing it, she felt a catch in her throat. She really was here. It was all real.

She turned to see Harry watching her closely. He glanced at the book in her arms and smiled. “Found something?”

“I can't believe that this is all real, Harry. I keep thinking it's a dream, or a delusion, and I'm going to wake up...” Her eyes met his. “And I'll never be able to get back again.”

Harry stepped closer, pulling her into his arms and hugging her close.

“It's not a dream, or a delusion. It is real, and if you ever can't find your way back again, we'll find you, and bring you back. So long as you want to come.”

Maura smiled up at him, “Why on earth wouldn't I want to come back? I feel... Harry I feel like I'm home, like I've finally found the place that I belong, the place I've been looking for for years.”

Harry broke eye contact with her, and hugged her again, hard.

She ended up buying the book, and followed a largely silent Harry from the shop. He led her to a small shop on the corner with some colorful robes hanging in the window.

"Gladrags," Maura read the sign hanging over the door. "Do you know how much I wish I had a camera right now?"

"Ginny and Hermione used to spend a lot of time, and money, in here."

She heard the wistful tone of his voice, and turned and looked at him, a sudden thought making her gasp.

"You loved her."

"Who?" Harry looked uncomfortable.

"Hermione. You loved her."

Harry sighed. "I never knew about love, Maura, before I came to this world. Ron and Hermione were my first experience with that. Ron was, and is, my best mate. We were, and are, completely loyal to each other. Hermione taught me about affection. Without her, I would never have understood that feeling something and showing it were two different things, but that both are okay."

"Yes," he confirmed. "I loved her. Very much. Just not the way you mean."

He took a deep breath and then pasted a smile on his face, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Let's get you some robes, shall we?"

"You're going to help?" she teased, knowing that to pursue the previous conversation would push him too far.

"I'll have you know..." he started, faking a huffy attitude.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...get going, Potter."

The moment they entered the shop, Maura realized that bringing him along might have been a bad idea. Perhaps she should have asked Ginny to bring her.

It was very obvious that he was easily recognized, and still had a certain standing as the defeater of the Dark Lord. The staff in the robe shop were almost prostrating themselves at his feet. In the process, Maura managed to be shown several robes, of which she chose two.

"What's wrong with the others?" Harry asked.

"Nothing. But these are the two I like best."

"You didn't like the others?"

"Very much," she glanced at the pile of discards. "Well, all except the pink. I hate pink."

"Then why are you only getting these two?"

She looked up at him, then at the very interested saleswitch.

"Harry, I only have so much money with me, and I doubt that they take VISA."

"I don't understand why that should be an issue."

"Harry," she lowered her voice. "I don't have unlimited funds. I can only afford to buy these two right now."

Harry looked closely at her for a moment. "Maura, I certainly hope that you didn't believe I would expect you to pay for these?"

Maura's cheeks were as pink as the rejected robes. "Harry...."

"I fully intend to see you properly kitted out. I told you that. And as you wouldn't be in this situation had I not involved you, any purchases that are required will be paid for by me. Understand?"

"Harry..."

"Enough." He turned to the saleswitch. "All of them, except the pink. Charge it all to my Gringotts account."

"Of course, Mr Potter," the saleswitch smiled.

"Harry, you can't be buying me clothes!" Maura began, only to have him look at her in a way which told her *exactly* what he thought of that.

"Oh, I assure you, I can. And have."

"Harry..."

"Not now, M..." he was very angry. "Just not now, okay?"

Angrier, she thought, than he'd probably been in a very long time. She wisely stayed silent for their return to the house.

Chapter Seven: Weasleys and Playwizards

Molly Weasley was nothing like what Maura had expected her to be. If, in fact, the older redhead standing in front of her was Molly.

Maura looked around the kitchen of Harry's home, which she had just entered in a very alarming manner. Harry had apparated them, and his arm felt warm around her waist. He had told her that traveling by Floo was dirty and overrated, and Maura smiled, remembering Harry's lack of skill and dislike of this method of travel from the books. Apparently some things were the same.

But the older witch standing with her hands on her rather ample hips looking ready to do battle was not even close to Maura's mental picture of the matriarch of the Weasley clan.

"Harry Potter! Where *have* you been?"

Now that, thought Maura, sounded familiar. Harry winced and then smiled at the older witch.

"Molly, how wonderful to see you. What are you doing here?"

She raised her right eyebrow at him. "I heard you have a house guest."

"Uh, yes...you've spoken to Arthur then?" Harry's eyes darted between Molly and Maura.

"At length," the woman replied dryly, turning to Maura. "Hello, dear. It's lovely to see you."

Maura was puzzled by that, but....

"Nice trip, then?"

"I..." Maura looked to Harry, confused.

"To Diagon Alley, dear. Ginny said you'd gone to explore?"

"Yes," Maura sighed. "Yes...Harry showed me around and I got some robes."

“Lovely!” Mrs Weasley put an arm around her and ushered her out of the kitchen and into the hallway, leading her towards the lounge. Maura looked desperately over her shoulder at Harry, who grinned, shrugged, and turned away.

Maura decided she'd kill him later.

Three hours later, exhausted by Molly's non-stop chatter, Maura met Arthur Weasley. Abruptly. He apparated into the kitchen, right in front of her, causing her to drop the cup of tea she'd been carrying from the counter to the table.

“Oh!” cried Maura.

“Oh, dear, I *am* sorry!” the older wizard fussed, dropping to one knee to help her with the spilled tea. “Oh, dear...I...good Lord!”

Maura looked up to see him staring at her.

“You must be Maura,” he said faintly.

“Yes,” she grabbed a cloth from the countertop and began to clear up the puddle of tea and broken china.

“Oh...terribly sorry...*reparo*.” He flicked his wand and the shattered teacup was back in one piece, the puddle of tea disappeared.

“Oh, thank you,” she said, standing.

“I'm terribly sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.”

“It's okay, really.”

“I'm...” he held out his hand, then realized he was holding his wand in it, quickly shifted around and held out his hand again, wand-free. “I'm Arthur Weasley.”

“Oh!” Maura was surprised. This tall, lanky wizard looked nothing like....but then, neither had Molly looked as she had expected her to. This wizard, Maura recognized, was an older version of Ron, only much thinner. “It's nice to meet you. Molly is...”

“Driving everyone around the bend, I'm sure.” Arthur finished for her with a grin. “When she heard you were here, well...there was no stopping her. I tried to warn Harry, but you were out.”

“Harry took me to Diagon Alley.”

“Ah,” he nodded.

“Arthur? Is that you, love?” Molly's strident voice came from the hallway.

“In the kitchen, Molly.”

They were joined by Ron and Ginny and their mother, who quickly served tea as they sat down around the large table.

“So, Mum, what brings you here today?” Ron asked, skiving one of the biscuits from a plate that Molly had apparently brought with her.

“Do I need a reason to come and see my two youngest children?”

“Yes.” Ron and Ginny said together, grinning at each other in a very long-suffering way.

“Well...”

“Come on, Mum. WE know the only reason you hot-footed it over over was the see Maura,” Ron confided.

“Ronald Weasley! Can't I come to visit you without...”

“Not likely. Since you gave up on marrying me off, I haven't seen you here three times in the last four months.”

“Who says I've given up on marrying you off, young man?” Molly's eyes held a determined glint. Maura shuddered.

Ron immediately whitened. He glanced between his sister, who was trying to contain her laughter, and his mother, then, obviously deciding that silence was decidedly the better option, snatched another biscuit and looked down into his teacup.

“Maura,” Molly turned suddenly on her. Maura gave a tiny squeak, but covered it with a cough as she sipped her tea. “Don't you think that every man of a certain age benefits from marriage?”

“Oh, absolutely, Molly,” she confirmed. “I think that every man benefits from marriage.”

“See, Ron?” Molly gloated.

“Unfortunately,” Maura continued. “The same can seldom be said for the wife.”

Ron's eyes danced, Ginny spluttered into her tea and Molly and Arthur stared, dumbfounded. Arthur recovered first, laughing out loud.

“Yes...well...” Molly stood and bustled around, cleaning the tea things just as Harry entered the room.

Seeing Ginny and Arthur choking with laughter, Molly industriously wiping his already spotless kitchen counter, and Ron's dancing eyes watching Maura, who was calmly sipping her tea, he became fully aware that he'd walked in on someone being firmly put in their place. And he had a sneaking suspicion that, for the first time in her life, it had been Molly.

“I like her, Harry. She's got more spunk that I thought.”

“Does she?” Harry asked absently as he glanced at a message from Severus. Fourteen potions instructors had been tenured, and Headmistress McGonagall had been interviewing for the DADA instructors. She had found six likely candidates, but all, apparently had more enthusiasm than experience.

“Have you noticed how she can talk to anyone? She doesn't hesitate. Put Mum in her place right quick about my getting married...”

Harry's eyes snapped up to look at his friend, “Married? I thought Molly left off with that when you told her you were going to start interviewing, and how you were going to go about weeding out the 'unacceptables'?”

"Apparently," Ron said darkly, "I underestimated my mother's...zeal."

"So she hasn't given up then?" Harry looked at his friend, concerned. Molly had systematically broken down the defenses of all of her children and seen them married, one by one. All except Ron.

If she ever succeeded, Harry had a horrible suspicion that he might be next in line for her... help. Harry felt a cold sweat break out on his neck.

"Ron, you have to be strong..."

"Harry," Ron looked up at him, his bright blue eyes shooting daggers at his friend.

"I mean it, Ron. Unless you truly love..."

Ron snorted his opinion of that happy state. "Your concern would be touching, mate, if I didn't know it was because you know that as soon as she's done with me, she'll be turning her attention to you. And I know full well that that scares you spitless."

"Ron," Harry gulped. "You know what she's got planned..."

"Ah, yes," Ron's merry eyes turned on him. "My sister. The little firebrand that tossed you over in sixth year, as I remember it."

"Ginny and I are *friends*, Ron, and I intend to keep it that way, despite your mother's...efforts."

"Think on it, Harry. She's an attractive witch...."

"Ron," Harry's voice rose warningly.

"If I didn't know you so well, I might, just *might*, mind you, encourage my mother to believe that there might be fertile ground there to sow..." Ron's eyes danced with glee.

"Ron!" Harry roared.

"Would you two hush?" Ginny came into the room. "They can hear you in Leeds, for Merlin's sake!"

Both men looked up, startled and guilty at her entrance, wondering how much she'd heard.

"For pity's sake, Ron, leave Harry alone!"

Ron swallowed, "Gin...I was just..."

"Protecting your own sorry hide from our over-zealous mother, I know."

Both men were silent, their eyes never leaving the fiery redhead standing in front of them.

"Merlin, Ron, you'd think her wanting you married was the end of the world. It's not that bad, so long as you care about the person you marry."

"I..."

"the problem with you two is that you're spoiled for choice," Ginny declared. Ron and Harry glanced disbelievingly at each other.

"What?" Ron asked.

"You're the dynamic duo! The two of you are famous and rich, and not a little easy on the eyes. You haven't been able to find *the* woman because there's been too many to choose from."

Harry wondered for a moment what alternate reality Ginny was living in. Certainly there'd been women in his life over the years...

Two.

...but it wasn't as though they'd been throwing themselves at his feet in the street or anything.

"Uh, Gin..." Harry began.

"Harry, you know full well you could have any witch you wanted. Neither you nor Ron have ever been the type to value what came to you too easily..."

Harry wondered exactly what it was that had come to him so easily.

“...so you haven't valued any of the women....”

“Oh, yes, Ginny,” Ron snorted. “The *crowds* of women!”

“Ron, you may not have noticed them, but they're there. Good Lord, Lavender Brown is *still* hanging around hoping that Harry will notice her!”

Harry made a strangled noise before he could stop himself. The only thought worse than Molly Weasley getting control of his marital status was her thinking Lavender Brown might make him a suitable wife.

“There isn't a witch under forty alive who doesn't want to shag you senseless...”

“Okay,” Harry stood, heading for the door and the kitchen. “This conversation just got way too surreal for me.”

“Harry,” Ginny said, “You are a very attractive man, with a lot to offer the right woman. Don't let the past rob you of that.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder at the woman he'd tried to consider a sister for almost twenty years.

“Ginny, I love you, but you saying things like that makes me really uncomfortable.”

“You might want to consider why, Harry, because it's the truth.”

Harry shook his head and continued on out the door, listening to the siblings bicker behind him.

He entered the kitchen to find Maura there, leaning against the counter and nibbling on one of Molly's biscuits absently. He wondered, not for the first time since bringing her here, how things could have changed so drastically. Standing in the doorway watching her, he knew she was unaware of his presence, lost in thought.

Her teeth nibbled on the cookie, and Harry became aware of so much about her. She really was an attractive woman, but it left him...unmoved. He could appreciate her beauty without his blood temperature rising. For the first time since she arrived, Harry realized he was seeing *her*, the person she really was. He liked that person. A lot.

"Hello, Harry," she said, finally noticing him standing there. "Everything okay?"

"Yes. I think so."

Her eyes met his for a moment, then she smiled.

"So, what's on for tomorrow, then?"

"I need to meet with Professor McGonagall to discuss the filling of the DADA position..."

"You advise her on hirings at Hogwarts?"

"No, not usually, but this particular position is in my field."

She cocked her head to the side, observing him. Her eyes were clear, and Harry got the impression that she was seeing him for the first time, as well.

"What do you do, Harry?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, while you're waiting around for the next Dark Lord to show up, how do you fill your days? What do you do for a living?"

"Well, I trained as an auror..."

"That couldn't have been too tough for you."

"Oh? And what do you know about auror training?" He smiled ruefully. She had no idea.

"Not much," she confirmed.

"I've heard it likened to muggle Navy Seal training...for the first year. After that it gets harder."

"How many years does it take?" she asked.

"Three, normally. But Ron and Hermione and I did it in one."

"Why?"

"There was a Dark Lord to vanquish."

"How on earth did you manage to get it done that quickly?"

"A lot of very dedicated instructors who gave up a lot of their free time. While most of the wizards accepted into the program trained from eight to four, we trained from eight am to midnight, every day, seven days a week.

"Good Lord..."

"Yes. Battle training is not easy."

"I would imagine not."

"Ron and I..."

"And Hermione."

"And Hermione," he nodded. "Worked very hard to prepare for what we thought was coming."

"What you *thought* was coming?"

Harry looked straight at her, the pain in his eyes was unbearable.

"What we thought the final battle would be."

"It wasn't what you thought it would be?" she asked quietly.

"No," Harry laughed, completely without humor. "No, it was really nothing like what we had expected."

“How so?”

“It was a thousand times worse.”

After a moment of silence, Maura sighed, then smiled.

“So, you're an auror.”

“Well, no,” Harry shook his head. “I trained as an auror to prepare for the battle with Voldemort. After that was over, there was little reason to continue.”

“So, what do you do then?”

“Well, I have some investments...”

“Harry Potter! Are you telling me that you're a playwizard?”

“A what?”

“A spoiled, rich man who spends his days pursuing pleasure and young witches, living off his inheritance,” she mocked.

Harry grinned, “Hardly. My living is earned from investments that I've made. I serve on several boards...”

“Eighteen,” said Ginny, entering the kitchen. “At last count.”

“Eighteen?”

“Well, yes,” Harry's ears turned pink.

“He's on the Board of Governors for Hogwarts, the Winzangamut, Wizard Economic Board...”

“Ginny!” Harry directed a look at her.

“And,” Ginny continued, apparently completely unfazed by Harry's rising temper. “He's been nominated to run for Minister of Magic after my father retires next year.”

“Ginny!”

"Do you think he'll win?" Maura asked, interestedly.

"By acclamation," Ginny confirmed, completely ignoring Harry. "No one wants to run against him. It would be a waste of time and money."

"Ginny!" Harry said sharply, gaining the attention of the two women.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Shut up, please."

"Of course, Harry."

"Do you..." Maura began.

"Maura?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You, too."

With this, he retreated from the room, leaving the two women watching him and ignoring the laughter he heard after the door was shut behind him.

Witches.

"So," Maura asked later of the redhead sitting across the kitchen table from her. "What *does* Harry do?"

Ginny absently stirred her tea. "What *doesn't* he do? He's always been very involved with Hogwarts."

"Teaching?"

"No. he's been an advisor to Minerva since...since we lost Dumbledore. All the teachers there turn to him. He is officially a professor, but it's only in an advisory capacity, and he is the adult advisor to the DA club there."

"What else?" Ginny mused. "He serves on the Gringotts Board, he's the head of the Muggle Relations Board at the Ministry..."

"Busy man."

"Yes. He's trying to get a new department started at the Ministry. Sort of a 'Dark Lord Early Detection' think. He wants to set up monitors..."

"The CIA of the wizarding world."

"CIA?" Ginny was confused.

"Sorry, it's the American spy agency. They monitor political situations around the world. Sometimes they do more than just monitor."

"Well, Harry just wants us to be prepared..."

"I understand, Ginny. Sorry, it was a silly comparison to make."

Ginny looked hard at her for a moment. "Maura, how do you feel about Harry?"

Maura took a breath, surprised. "I like him. He's a gentleman and pleasant to be around."

"Are you attracted to him?"

"I don't know." Maura looked down into her tea. This was a very odd conversation to be having.

"You don't *know*?" Ginny asked, disbelievingly.

"No. I don't. I feel something, Ginny. If this were my old life, my muggle life, I might be tempted to explore it. We have.... I feel some sort of connection, but well, I'm simply not sure. It's not like any attraction I've ever felt. I thought it was, but...well, it's not. It's more about him as a person, and they physical is...well, absent. Harry seems to *know* me, and that is a very good feeling. I have a difficult time connecting with people, and it's not often I let someone in...I don't know what it is.

"And we have a job to do here...."

"And you don't mix business with pleasure."

"I try not to. It gets confusing."

"Are you married?" Ginny asked.

"Married? Me? No!"

"Why not?"

"What do you mean, why not? I'm just...not."

"Are you...not interested?" Ginny grinned impishly.

"I'm perfectly interested in men, Ginny Thomas! I just...my lifestyle doesn't leave much room for family."

"Do you have any? Family, I mean?"

"No. My parents died when I was younger."

"Oh?"

"I was eighteen. We were on our way home after having dinner out for my Dad's birthday. We were in an accident and...they died. I didn't."

"Why did you choose the career you did?"

"War correspondent? Well, I started as a reporter. I took journalism in university, and, well, I've always been fascinated by war. I don't know why, but it just felt like where I was supposed to be."

Ginny watched her for a moment, then stood, taking her teacup to the sink. "Well, I'm bushed. I'm going to head up. You should, too. I know that Harry wants to make an early start in the morning."

"An early start?" Maura asked.

"Yes. Hogwarts. He's taking you with him. Goodnight, Maura. Sleep well."

Maura sat at the table for another five minutes before heading up to her room.

Tomorrow, she would see Hogwarts.

Chapter Eight: Hogwarts

They apparated into a small living room. There was a chair and a small side table, a sofa and a television. But Maura's eyes noticed more. Years of being a journalist in a war zone, sometimes being in situations where her very life depended on how observant she was, had honed her powers of observation.

No one lived here. At least not now.

There were no pictures. The books on the shelves were too neatly placed. It was perfectly clean, the draperies were perfectly creased, the television remote control sat on the side table, alone. There weren't any magazines, or candy dishes, or throw pillows.

And there was a sense of emptiness.

"Harry, where are we?"

"In a house on the outskirts of the wizard village you know as Hogsmeade."

"I...can we leave? I don't like it here."

Harry stared hard at her for a moment. "Of course we can leave. I apparated us here because you can't apparate directly into Hogwarts."

"I thought *you* could?" She was confused.

"*I* can. *You* can't. The security spells would have let me through, but you would be left floating in the Abyss."

"Ah, well...this is infinitely preferable, then. But I would still like to leave. I...I don't like this place. It gives me a...creepy feeling."

Everything in the room had an *old* air to it. Not antique, but just out of date. The sofa appeared to be unused, in perfectly new condition, but the style was from some years back. The television was an older model. Maura felt like she was in a time warp.

"Who lives here, Harry?" She asked suddenly.

"No one. Not now. Ron and I keep the place up...for old times sake."

"Who owns it?"

"Ron and I."

"Who *did* own it?" Maura was afraid she knew the answer.

"It belonged to Hermione. She bought it after her parents estate was settled, about six months before...the final battle."

"And you and Ron..."

"All three of us had wills made up in our final year at Hogwarts. We knew it was unlikely that all three of us would survive the final battle. We'd become so close... Well, all three of us left everything we owned to the other two. In the event that all three of us fell, everything would have gone to Ginny. We figured, if it took Ginny, too, then it would have taken the entire Weasley clan, because there wasn't one of them who wouldn't have taken a death spell for her. Ginny was probably the most well protected witch throughout the entire war. If all of us fell, we didn't really care who it went to. At that time, there wasn't much, anyhow."

"But your parents left you money?"

"A bit. Not much. Not enough to live on. I've made some good investments over the years, and it's grown, but the money my parents left was enough to see me through school and set me up afterwards – no more. It wasn't much money, but there was the house. Ron has a small property in Wales that his grandmother left him. Hermione had this.

"Ron and I stay here when we need to be in the area. It's more comfortable than staying at the school, but it's...well, there is still the feeling of Hermione here. It can bring back memories. We come here every year....with the others, to remember."

"The others?"

“The Weasleys. Minerva, Tonks, Remus...Snape. Those of us who stood together in the final battle.”

Harry sighed, “Let's go.”

They stepped out onto a small covered porch, the wooden screen door slapping shut behind them. There was a short brick pathway down to the road, and the front garden was surrounded by a quaint picket fence.

The garden was a mass of flowering perennials. Maura gasped.

“It's beautiful.”

“Mione loved to garden,” Harry stated, his voice was both happy and sad. Fond memories, Maura thought. “She could make anything bloom. Ginny and Molly come and see to it sometimes, to keep it up. Neville is generally here once a week or so.”

“Neville Longbottom?”

“Yes,” Harry confirmed. “Mione helped him through Herbology the first couple of years. He's now the Herbology professor at Hogwarts.”

Maura thought of her poor cactus, Henry, sitting on the sunny window ledge above her kitchen sink in her tiny flat in London. She had chosen it because it could survive the long stretches that she was away on assignment without her care. A low maintenance plant, for a low-maintenance life.

She felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. “Harry?”

“Hmmm?”

“I have to go back soon, don't I?”

He looked at her, then nodded. “Yes. You do. Soon.”

Maura nodded, then looked beyond the colorful garden. A little ways off was a small village, the unpaved road curving around two small cottages before it opened onto the main street. She looked in the

other direction, and gasped. There was a castle there. A very large, noticeable castle, with tall turrets and a huge front gate.

But she was sure that it hadn't been there a moment ago.

"Harry?"

"It's okay, Maura. You're allowed to see it now. It just took a minute for the wards to identify you."

"That is just too weird."

"It can be a bit of a surprise," he agreed. "It's one of the reasons why first years are brought across the lake. It gives the wards more time to recognize each of them. It can be an odd experience, I understand. Everyone sees it at a different time, coming across the lake..."

"You didn't...?"

"I could always see it. From the moment it was in view. Dumbledore had charmed the wards to always recognize me, no matter what. He wanted me to find my way here if I ever needed to, even before I was of age to attend."

Maura nodded. It sounded like something Dumbledore would do. She didn't know how she knew this, but strangely, she was absolutely certain of it.

They entered the castle grounds through the large front gates. Everywhere she looked, she saw flowers. There were beds of them everywhere.

At the front steps, she hesitated, looking up.

"What?" Harry asked, sensing her hesitation.

"I don't know. I feel odd."

"There is nothing to be frightened of. You're perfectly safe."

"I know. I'm not scared. I just felt strange for a moment. Like I should be running up these steps."

Harry grinned, "Then let's run!"

They ran up the remaining stone steps, pausing in front of the large wooden doors.

"Maura, before we go in, I should warn you that, well, you're probably going to see things in here that are difficult to understand..."

"Like talking pictures?" she teased.

"Well..."

"Harry? I'm safe with you, right?"

"Absolutely."

"And there is nothing threatening in there, right?"

"No...just, maybe, surprising."

"Fine. I'm fine. Really."

Harry took a deep breath and smiled at her. "Good then."

He opened the front door and they entered a cool, shady vestibule. There was a second set of doors six feet away and they went through these into a huge hall, at least thirty feet high, and twice that long.

"Wow."

"It is rather...large."

"Impressive."

"Harry! How wonderful to see you!" came a voice from behind them. Maura didn't turn immediately, as she was transfixed by the huge mural on the ceiling of the afternoon sky...as she watched, a bird flew...

Wow.

"Ah, hello, Nick!" Harry's voice greeted the newcomer.

“And who do we have here?”

Maura finally tuned to greet the newcomer, and stopped dead.

The person in front of her wasn't a person at all. He floated several feet off the floor, and was perfectly transparent.

“Maura, this is Sir Nicholas...”

Maura took a deep breath, swallowed, then passed out at Harry's feet.

“Rather nervous sort, is she?” Sir Nicholas looked down at her.

“Not normally, no.” Harry said grimly, then picked Maura up in his arms and carried her towards the Headmasters' office.

“I *did* warn her...”

“Perhaps you should have warned her a bit more specifically, Mr Potter.”

Maura heard the voices before she opened her eyes. She had a feeling that she didn't want to open her eyes, and that much would change when she did.

“There now, Miss Kennedy, it's all right now. Come along, wake up.”

Maura opened her eyes to look into the sparkling ones above her. Minerva McGonagall.

“Professor?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“I'm at Hogwarts.”

There was a moment of alarm in Minerva McGonagall's eyes as she glanced over at Harry, then back.

“Harry brought me to see the school.”

Relief was apparent there now.

“Yes. And the silly boy forgot to prepare you for what you were about to see.”

“It's not Harry's fault. He tried. I told him I knew I was safe and wasn't frightened. I just didn't expect....”

Minerva nodded, “Of course you didn't.”

“Ghosts. You really have ghosts.”

“Yes, dear.”

“They really do exist!”

“Of course. Sir Nicholas would be most put out if he thought that you thought he didn't.”

Maura smiled, turning her eyes on Harry, who was standing beside the couch she was lying on.

“Alright?” she asked.

“That's my line.”

“Sorry, you just looked, well, odd.”

He grinned, “Odd? Miss Kennedy, how very polite of you!”

Maura's cheeks turned pink. “I just thought you looked...I'm fine, Harry. Feeling rather silly, but fine.”

“I should have warned you.”

“You tried. I was the dunce who wouldn't let you finish, and now I feel a right prat.”

“No need. No one but Sir Nicholas saw us.”

“Thank you.”

“Well,” Minerva broke in. “Perhaps we should get to our business, Harry, so that we can show Maura around before you have to leave.”

They spent nearly an hour in the Headmistresses office before Harry stood, smiling down at her.

"Well, I don't know about you two, but I'm famished. Let's have lunch before we have a quick tour."

"Lunch is currently being served in the Great Hall," Minerva nodded. "And then you can show Maura around, Harry."

"Oh, I was hoping..."

"I'm sorry, I won't be able to join you. I have two more interviews this afternoon for DADA professors. All I've seen so far have just served to convince me of the total lack of talent out there."

"Hey!" Harry grinned.

"Yes, Mr Potter. Unfortunately, you have refused the position. Repeatedly."

"Minerva, I'm not teacher material."

"You don't know until you try, Mr Potter."

"With everything else..."

"Yes. I know. Perhaps Mr Weasley..." Minerva looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Ron?" Harry snorted. "In a school full of hormonal girls? Are you insane?"

"Indeed," Minerva frowned. "Yes, perhaps you're right, Harry. It was hard enough keeping him in his own dorm room when he was a student here and the girls all thought of him as rather an idiot. Now that he has achieved both fame and fortune, I fear it would be like putting a cat amongst the pigeons."

"Ron wouldn't...!" Maura was shocked. "They're *children*!"

"Some of our seventh year girls are practically women, Maura." Said Minerva gently. "In our world, most marry directly out of Hogwarts."

“Ron isn't known for his...self control, Maura.” Harry said. “He likes women, and seventeen is the age of consent in our world.”

Maura was silent as they left the office and walked through cool stone hallways. There were many students out and about, and when they saw Harry, many whispered conversations ensued.

“Do they always stare at you like this?” she asked him in an undertone. Harry, who had been oblivious to the attention they were garnering, glanced around, at the very interested students milling about, and then back to her.

“Yes, I suppose so.” He glanced around again, putting a hand at the small of her back and steering her away from a group that seemed to be working up their courage to approach.

“Have you students eaten?” Minerva demanded of them.

“Er...yes, Professor.”

“Then you should be on your way to your fourth period class.”

“Yes, Professor,” they called, heading away from them.

“It's amazing the attention you still...”

“Not only Mr Potter, Miss Kennedy.” Minerva stated. “We don't often have visitors at Hogwarts. You should expect some attention yourself.”

Maura glanced between Harry and the headmistress. There had been some silent communication there, but she was unsure of what it meant.

They entered the Great Hall and approached the front table at McGonagall's normal swift pace. There were four long tables, all arranged perpendicular to the long head table. Many students were seated around and there were several teachers at the head.

Harry led Maura down the centre aisle,. Halfway, she got a very strange feeling, almost as though she was being watched, but when

she turned to look at the table that the feeling seemed to be coming from, there was no one there. Harry paused beside her and looked down.

“Okay?”

“Hmmm?” she turned back to him. “Yes...just the strangest feeling.”

Harry looked closely at her. “You're probably hungry. Come along, Minerva told me that there are lamb chops on the menu today.”

He wiggled his eyebrows at her suggestively, then grinned down at her.

She smiled, confused and followed him again, towards the head table.

How on earth had Harry known about her love of lamb chops?

They enjoyed an excellent meal, and several of the teachers laughed when she jokingly mentioned the lack of enslaved house elves. Minerva looked at her strangely.

After lunch, they said their farewells to the headmistress and headed off for Maura's tour of the school before heading back to Potter Manor. The first place Harry took her was the Quidditch pitch. She could imagine the screaming students in the stands. They visited the lake and the astronomy tower. Harry grinned as they stood there.

“So, Miss Kennedy.”

“So, what, Mr Potter?”

“So...here we are. In the astronomy tower...”

“Ummhmm,” she smiled. “I would imagine you spent a good deal of your free time here when you were a student?”

“Actually, no,” he said, his hands in the pockets of his jeans as he moved towards the railing and leaned out, looking over the side. “I only had two...well, I guess you could call them girlfriends, while I was at Hogwarts.”

“Cho Chang.” Maura stated.

“Very short lived, that.”

“And?”

Harry grinned, “For an even shorter time, Ginny Weasley.”

“Ginny!”

“Yes.”

“But you said...”

“It was over twenty years ago and, as I said, very short lived.”

“How short lived?” She felt something....strange. Almost as though she had known this already.

“About three months.”

“What happened?”

“She dumped me,” he stated promptly.

“What? Why?” Maura was shocked.

Harry grinned. “As much as I'd like to take your reaction as a compliment, I think it probably has more to do with the surprise of my having dated Ginny at all.”

“But...”

“I had stuff going on that wasn't conducive to having a girlfriend. You know, saving the world and all that.”

“Ah.”

“By the time I got it figured out, she was dating Dean. And I don't poach.”

“So you didn't...”

"Nope. Just those two."

"And since?"

"Well, there have been a few. But I never know what they want."

"Or who?"

"Yes," he smiled at her understanding. "Yes. I never know if it's me, or..."

"Or the man who lived."

"Right."

"Did you 'know' with Cho?"

"I thought I did. But it turned out I was wrong."

"And what about with Ginny?"

"Ginny was...well, it was never about who I was supposed to be with Ginny, just about who I am. Always has been."

"And," Maura persisted. "If you hadn't had stuff going on?"

"I did."

"But what if you hadn't?"

"I don't know. I like to think that I wouldn't have been stupid enough to let her go, but you never know."

Maura looked at him, wondering. "Harry, do you still have feelings for Ginny?"

Harry's face closed up. "She's like a sister to me, Maura."

She watched him carefully for a moment, then turned towards the stairway. "So, how about showing me Gryffindor Tower?"

"I won't be able to get us in," he said quickly. "It's the student's living quarters and..."

"Fair enough. How about the library, then? And then you can take me home."

"Done," he smiled at her, liking the fact that she was referring to Potter Manor, and not her muggle apartment.

Later that evening, Maura sat watching the others in the library, absently drinking a cup of tea and taking part in the conversation only when directly addressed. Ron seemed to be trying to find reasons to directly address her.

The Weasley siblings were, and had been, carrying on an argument about Molly and her wish to see all of her children "settled". It had been in full swing when Harry and Maura returned from Hogwarts and was still, some hours later, going strong.

"Ron, I just don't see why you're so set against marriage."

"Look, Gin, it's not for everyone, okay? Just because you and Dean had a pretty much perfect, idyllic existence..."

At that, Ginny's face went perfectly white. Maura set her teacup down beside her and was about to stand and go to her when Ginny abruptly rose and all but ran from the room.

"Ronald Weasley, you are a prat!" Maura hissed at him, then followed the redhead.

Ron was silent for a moment, then turned to Harry, who was sitting in his large leather wingback chair, staring in shock at his oblivious friend.

"What was that all about?"

"Ron," Harry said in a deathly quiet tone, "has it escaped your notice that your sister's 'perfect, idyllic existence' was disrupted by the violent and horrific *death of her husband at the hands of Death Eaters*?"

Ron looked at Harry a moment, then groaned and ran a hand through his already messy hair.

"But I didn't mean..." he started. "Oh, bollocks."

"Ron, Ginny has been through more pain than...." Harry shook his head. "Has it occurred to you that she knows that she can't ever achieve that kind of happiness again for herself, with Dean gone, but that she wants it for you?"

Ron just stared at Harry, then shook his head. "Harry, you know I can't..."

"I know nothing of the sort. But I do know that you are the most insensitive prat I've ever known when it comes to women's feelings and, coming from me, mate, that is definitely saying something."

"I guess I should go and apologise, huh?"

"Yes. I think that that would be a start."

Ron nodded, and swallowed, then headed out of the room in search of his sister, leaving Harry to stare into the fire and try to get control over the rage and pain he was feeling.

"He's an idiot, Gin'," Maura stated, tucking her legs under her on Ginny's bed. The younger woman had initially told her she was fine when she knocked on her door, but when Maura had looked at her doubtfully, she'd caved in, and begun to sob.

Maura had pulled her into her arms and hugged her, then guided her into the room, closing and locking the door behind them. Ginny now sat, her back propped against the headboard of her bed, plucking absently at the pillow in her lap.

"It's just..."

"He had no right to say that, the insensitive beast. Someone should lock him up....or run him over. With a very large truck."

Ginny smiled, but it was such a sad smile that Maura felt her heart tug.

"Ginny, I'm sure he was..."

"He was wrong."

"Well, of course he was!"

"No, Maura. I mean..." Ginny paused.

"Gin?"

"I...he was wrong about Dean and I leading a perfect, idyllic existence. It wasn't perfect, or idyllic. It wasn't even close."

"Well," Maura said, uncertain of how to continue. "All relationships...all marriages have their rough bits..."

"Oh, it was far more than a 'rough bit'," Ginny laughed. "Unless a 'rough bit' can last twelve years."

Maura sighed, "You weren't happy with him?"

"It wasn't that I wasn't happy with him, but more that he wasn't happy with me. I was very honest with him from the first. Dean was fully aware how I felt, or rather, how I didn't feel. He knew how much I'd be able to give him, and I thought I'd made it clear...but Dean loved nothing better than a challenge."

"Ginny?"

"I didn't love him, Maura. Not as a wife should love her husband. He was a good husband, he provided well for the girls and I. He gave me three beautiful daughters...and for that I adore him. I cared a great deal for him...but I didn't love him."

"Why...?"

"I started dating Dean because he asked me. And I had no reason to say no. I knew that I had to get on with my life, and I knew..." she sighed. "Harry and I dated for a while when he was in sixth year..."

"I know."

Ginny looked at her, surprised. "He *told* you?"

"Well, yes." Maura admitted.

"I sometimes wonder if he even remembers."

"Oh, he remembers," Maura laughed. "Sometime you'll have to tell me about the significance of the third floor corridor near the east tower at Hogwarts."

Ginny blanched. "He took you there?"

"Well, we were on our way to the library and we seemed to be there without realizing it. Harry was...shaken... when he realized where we were. We'd been in the astronomy tower and he'd mentioned you..."

Ginny squeaked. Literally. Then she buried her face in the pillow in her lap. It was rather comical to see a thirty four year old woman like that, but Maura took pity, kind of, and continued.

"So, any significance to the third door in the east corridor?"

Ginny sat up, her face bright pink, and swallowed.

"It's a...small storage room."

"Ah." Maura grinned. Now they were getting somewhere. "So now I understand."

"Maura, it was only the one time and we agreed after...after Harry decided he needed to focus on the prophecy, that we'd never...refer to it again."

"And then you started dating Dean?"

"Pretty much," Ginny sighed. "I was sixteen and hurt. I originally accepted Dean's invitations because I needed to be... well, my pride was hurt. Then, I thought, I'd show Harry that *he* might not want me, but... well, then years went by, and I got comfortable. Dean proposed

after I finished school. I explained to him... Maura I was always honest with him about how I felt. I never led him on. I swear."

"I know, Gin'."

"Maybe that was why. Over the years, Dean got more and more... well, determined. One would think that he wouldn't want to be around Harry, or me to be around him, but he practically... he always flaunted our relationship, showed how happy he was. I couldn't not...I felt I owed it to him to respond to him in the same way. I suppose it wasn't fair to Dean, but..."

"And after he died?"

"I... Harry was the first one there, that night. He killed seven Death Eaters to get to us. They had managed to break through the protection spell Dean had put on the room the girls and I were hidden in. Maddy was only seven... Harry came through the door like a demon, throwing curses. He had found Dean outside, and he knew which room we had set up as our safe room."

"Safe room?"

"A safe room is... well, protection spells take time to set up, so most wizarding families have a room already prepared in case of a Death Eater attack. If you have it ready, you only have to give a basic command and the room seals itself. The downsides are that someone has to stay outside to seal it, and that the people in the room can't get out until they're released from the outside."

"I don't know how the Death Eaters got through the protection spells, but they had just broken through when Harry came in. He saved our lives. He told me about Dean, and...he was there for us. He brought us here..."

"Which only made you love him more."

"I don't think I know what love is anymore, Maura. At this point, I'd do anything to ensure *his* happiness. He deserves some."

They heard the tentative knock at the door, and Maura raised an eyebrow at Ginny. Ginny shook her head. Maura stood and went to open the door a crack.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Is she okay?" Ron asked the cold, yet obviously enraged woman before him.

"Do you care?"

"She's my sister, Maura. Of course I care."

"I hope you've come with an apology, Ronald Weasley. Because that is all that is standing between you and life as a eunuch."

"Can I..." Ron winced. Maura was really, really angry. "Ginny?"

"It's okay, Maura. Let him in. And thanks for listening."

"No problem. If he is that insensitive again, you have my full support in a permanent bat bogey hex."

Ginny smiled, and Maura, after throwing another wilting look at Ron, left and headed to her own room, and bed.

The next morning, she awoke, wondering why she had dreamt, seemingly all night, about running her hand repeatedly through the ginger fur of a lion.

Chapter Nine: Back to the Muggle World

When Maura entered the kitchen the next morning, she knew that something had changed. Drastically. Harry was talking into a cell phone, Ron was pacing, and Ginny was sitting, whitefaced, watching Harry on the phone.

"Ginny? Ron?" Maura stood in the doorway, keeping her voice low so as to not disturb Harry on the phone. "What's happened?"

Ron turned and looked at her for a moment, blankly, before his eyes cleared. Shaking his head, as if to clear it, he stepped forward. "There have been some Death Eater attacks overnight, Maura. We're just finding out..."

At that moment, Harry wound up his call with a terse, "Call me when you know more."

"Well?" Ginny asked quietly, as he closed the phone and put it in his pocket. "How bad is it?"

"Forty seven separate attacks starting at three this morning."

There was a collective gasp, and Ginny sobbed.

"So many?" Maura was shocked, wondering at the number of Death Eaters that would be required to make so many attacks at once.

"That is the most in one night since...well, in a long time," said Ginny.

Harry's eyes were on the red-headed woman's bent head for a moment before he spoke quietly, "Five years, Gin."

She raised her eyes to his and Maura felt their connection, like electricity, in the room.

"So..." Ron cleared his throat. "Harry? Who?"

"Too many," Harry sighed. "Seamus Finnegan survived, but Lacey and the boys..."

"No!" Ginny cried. "Dear God, neither one of them were five years old yet!"

"Ginny," Harry turned to her, "There's more."

Both Ginny and Ron stiffened at the tone in Harry's voice. When Harry hesitated to tell you something, you knew that he was gaging either your reaction, or your ability to handle what he was about to say.

"Charlie's home was destroyed. He and Amelia and the twins are okay, but the house is...gone."

"Oh, Merlin..."

"They're on their way here. So are your Mum and Dad. The Burrow just isn't safe right now, and your Dad is going to be a target. I've asked the twins to bring their families here, but they both have refused. Bill is on his way with Janie, as well. He says things are heating up in France, too."

"It's beginning," said Ron flatly, staring at the wall.

"Again," whispered Ginny.

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "There were more casualties last night...many more. No one that we knew personally, but Dennis Creavey was injured. He was at his parents home, lucky for them. If he hadn't been, they'd be dead. They're the only known survivors other than Charlie's family and Seamus. Every other target that we know of was...well, there were no other survivors of a direct attack."

His cell phone beeped, and Harry answered it quickly.

"Hello. Yes," his face froze. "Dear God... you're kidding? Where was he? Yes...okay. Let me know. I should be there in about....twenty minutes."

Maura stared at him, knowing there was worse news coming, but not knowing what it could possibly be. As he hung up, he stared straight at Maura.

"There's been another attack."

"What? Another?" Ron said, stunned.

"In muggle London."

"Oh," Ginny said, turning to Maura.

"They've bombed Downing Street and Windsor Castle. They were both completely destroyed. Both the Prime Minister and the majority of the Royal family are dead. Prince William is on his way back from Switzerland...he wasn't there, and Sarah and the princesses are in Vail. It would appear that England has a new king."

"Dear God..." Maura whispered.

"Maura, it's time for you to go back." Harry said.

"Yes, of course. Let me get my things..."

"Just grab your handbag. I'll get the rest to you. We don't have much time."

"Yes..." Maura left the room quickly, her mind swimming.

Apparently, it had begun.

=====

Harry apparated them to her flat, then quickly handed her a small round token made from some dark stone, and a bit of paper.

"Keep this with you at all times. If you ever need to get to us, or you're in a situation that you need to get out of and can't, hold the stone tightly in your left hand and read the incantation on the paper. It's a portkey, and it will bring you to the Manor."

"Okay, thank you," she swallowed. "I'll be talking to my editor immediately, Harry. We'll get this done."

"I know," he nodded, trying to smile. "I'll be back tonight with your other things. If I can't get here, Ron or Ginny will come."

"Can I call you on...that phone thing?"

"Of course," he recited off the number. "It's a normal cell phone, nothing magical about it."

"Harry, be careful."

"Oh, I intend to. You remember, watch out. Be aware of everything around you, and don't hesitate to use that portkey. They may...well, we don't know what they know. They may know about you now."

"I'll be fine. But I have a job to do, and so do you. Get going."

There was a distinct pop as he left, leaving Maura feeling very alone.

=====

She went into the office an hour later. Luckily, as she worked on a freelance basis, no one questioned her absence over the last few days. She made her way directly to the office of Naomi Baxter, her editor.

"Maura! I've been trying to get hold of you for days. Now this, this morning...who would have thought? Anyhow, I want you on the next flight to Baghdad..."

"Naomi, I've got to talk to you."

"Maura, the flight leaves in an hour."

"Naomi, send Bryce. I won't be going."

"What?" the statuesque black woman turned, looking directly at her for the first time. No one refused assignments from Naomi Baxter.

"I need to speak to you, privately, now. Please."

Naomi's eyes narrowed and she looked at Maura for a moment before nodding once, swiftly, and turning and striding towards her private office. Maura followed.

"Okay, speak," Naomi closed the door behind them, then sat behind the imposing and cluttered desk. "And this had better be worth wasting my time."

"Naomi, what would you say if I told you that there is an underground world, one that operates concurrently with ours, but is... different?"

"I'd ask what you'd been smoking, hon'."

"For the last week, I've been staying with people who live completely differently than we do. Whose daily concerns seldom have anything to do with what is going on around us in our world, but who have information on what's going on with these terrorist bombings and the reasons behind them."

Naomi, eyes glinting with interest, sat forward in her chair. "Are you telling me that you've infiltrated one of their cells?"

"No! These people aren't the terrorists. They're fighting them, just as we are. Just for different reasons."

"Oh?"

"Bear with me for a minute, okay? There are two worlds. One we know about, function in, and one that operates within ours, but separate from it. We could walk past these people on the street, and do every day, and don't know that they are so radically different from us. They have magic, Naomi..."

Naomi stood. "You're right, Maura. I'm sending Bryce to Baghdad. You need a vacation."

"Please, just listen to me!"

"No. London was attacked this morning, Maura, and you might have the time to spend thinking up fairy stories, but I have to get people assigned to cover this all over the world. This is not shaping up into a particularly good day, and you're not helping the situation! Go home, Maura."

She opened the door to her office, stepping back and gesturing for Maura to leave.

"They need..."

"Maura, go!" Naomi was angry now, and several people outside her office stopped to see what was going on.

Maura sighed, then shook her head. "They told me that you probably wouldn't listen."

=====

She spent the entire afternoon and a good portion of the evening on the phone in her flat. She called every contact that she'd ever had, and was no further ahead than she'd been when Harry had brought her back that morning.

Frustrated and angry, she turned on the news channel and sat down, a tub of ice cream in front of her.

"...further information will be made available as we have it. In related news, after the bombings of the two most recognizable seats of power in the UK earlier today, many are asking if our national security policy..."

Maura, listening intently to the announcer, was startled at a loud pop, and turned to find Ron standing there.

"Oh...hello," she said, standing.

"Maura. How was it today?"

"Terrible," she said, then suddenly began to sob, dropping the ice cream on the coffee table and stepping towards him. He wrapped his arms around her instinctively.

"That good, huh?" he asked quietly after a moment.

"You have no idea."

"Oh, I think I might," he smiled bitterly.

"I...of course you do," she nodded. "How are Charlie and the rest of your family?"

"Safe. Harry and Bill spent most of the day tightening security on the house. They're at George's right now, beefing things up there."

"Why won't...I guess I just don't understand why they don't just go to Harry's."

"A couple of reasons. If Harry's place gets found out, we would have no other place to go. Fred and George's places are very well protected, Maura. They know how to take care of themselves. I actually pity the Death Eater that gets through the outer security on either of their homes. Their pranks can be lethal, literally."

"But Harry said they didn't..."

"Nah. They just don't make a living at it. But when it comes to their families, those two know how to apply everything they ever knew about pranking in very...creative...ways."

He pulled away from her and moved over to the couch, indicating for her to follow him and sit down. "So. What's going on? Were you able to..."

"Oh, Ron!" she cried. "It's terrible! No one will believe me. I've tried every single contact I've ever had and they're all..."

"Disbelieving?"

"Like you wouldn't believe."

Ron sat, picked up her ice cream and spoon and began to thoughtfully eat. "So maybe you need some new contacts."

Maura snorted. "I've spent years cultivating the most credible contacts in the industry, Ron."

"So maybe you need some that aren't so credible, then."

"What?" Maura was confused. "Ron, credibility is everything. If you don't have that, people don't believe anything you report..."

"Maura, you're trying to tell people that a fantasy world really does exist. How credible do you think you're going to be?"

"Lose my credibility?" she shrieked. "Are you insane?"

"Maura, think about this. Get it into the tabloids..."

"The *tabloids*?" her voice rose even more. "You *are* insane! No one believes anything in those things!"

Ron chuckled. "In the wizarding world, the circulation of the Quibbler and Witch Weekly are both three times that of the Prophet. Ask Harry how many people take the stories in the tabloids seriously. Trust me, people believe what is written in them."

"But not people who matter!"

Ron looked at her strangely, "Matter? Maura, *everyone* matters. Every warm body that we can convince is another person who will be ready to fight. It doesn't matter how we get the information to them, just that we do. We're not worried about increasing the circulation of a publication here, or building a reputation. We're trying to save some lives."

Maura swallowed. How on earth was she going to do this?

=====

They sat on her couch and watched the news coverage for the next hour. When Ron finally stood to leave, Maura understood a lot better what it was she had to do.

She knew that any good story started with research. Knowing what you were writing about inside and out. With that in mind, she flicked on her computer and began.

At six thirty the next morning, Harry's cell phone rang.

"Potter," he answered.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" she asked.

"Hardly," his voice relaxed a bit at the sound of her voice. God only knew what, or who, he'd been expecting. "I haven't been to bed yet."

"Oh, Harry!"

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I've been up all night researching..."

Harry chuckled.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. "What do you need?"

"Well, I have some information for you, and I need some clarification on a couple of things."

"Shoot."

For the next half hour, Maura told him everything that she had found. After telling him about three obscure terrorist cells she'd tracked down, who seemed to be able to disappear into thin air, and do other intriguing things that just might be explainable with the use of magic, she stopped.

"I wish I could fax you what I've got here. I have some pictures..."

"Well, you could fax them," he said. "Or would emailing them be easier?"

Maura was silent.

"Maura? You there?"

"I did it again, didn't I?"

"Yep. You did," he agreed. "Let me give you my fax and email...send me anything you think might be applicable."

"Harry, I have to ask you..."

"What?"

"Have you ever heard of a man named Langly Griffin?"

It was Harry's turn to be silent.

"Harry?"

"I haven't heard that name in about seventeen years."

"Who is he?"

"Was. He was one of Dumbledore's cronies. He...Dumbledore...relied on him for much of his information."

"A Death Eater?"

"No. I think he was who our esteemed author fashioned Mundungus Fletcher after. A wizard who was... well, shady. But not completely rotten, if you know what I mean."

"Ah."

"Why? Where did you hear that name? Langly has been dead for seventeen years. He died in the final battle."

"Did he have a son?"

"No."

"Well, then, he's not dead."

"Maura, Dumbledore saw him fall."

"How do you know?"

"Because he told me so."

"Weren't you a little...preoccupied?"

"Maura, the final battle lasted three days before I faced Voldemort."

"Oh. Well...what exactly did Dumbledore tell you?" Her voice was uncertain. He could tell she was reading something while she spoke to him.

"He told me that Langly was gone."

"'Gone' or 'dead'?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Gone. He said 'gone'."

"Well, Harry, he's back. His name is popping up everywhere. Along with Peter Pettigrew and Theodore Nott. And another...."

"Dear God," Harry muttered.

"...yes....here it is, Ali Sam Al-Hid. AKA..."

Harry gasped. "Philip Mahood!"

"How did you know...?"

"Maura, I'll call you back. Send me that stuff right away, I have to make another call..."

"Harry, I'm starting the story! Who is this Philip Mahood?"

"He," Harry said quietly, "is the new Dark Lord."

=====

Now – to answer each one of you....

James Milamber: *Confused? Confused is good. Actually, I'm going somewhere with this – you just have to hang in there. And I can fully imagine Maura in a semi, repeatedly running over Ron and utterly furious with him as she does it! But a profound lack of sleep can do it, too. Chocolate helps. Really. So does coffee by IV.*

Shotgunn: James Milamber is my new hero. He's sending people to my story, and that makes me VERY happy! His story (Harry Potter and the Mind Mage) is my absolute favorite. Therefore he gets TWO gold stars from me! Harry DOES come across that way in the beginning. Remember who the major influences in his life have been, and the situation he finds himself in now. Essentially, he has Dumbledore's role, and this is the only way he really knows how to play it. That, and he's a pretty strong man now, used to being listened to. He is loosening up some, though. My "love square" (I love that, can I steal it?) is only going to get better...trust me. I know it's confusing, but all will be revealed!!! I think at first HARRY thought Harry might get with Maura, but Harry needs to learn a few things on different types of attraction, I think...Thanks so much for your kind words – I needed them! I will definitely check out your story!!

Larna Mandrea: Fright? Wow....all I can say about the last sentence is...think about it. Thanks for your kind comments, you have no idea of how good it makes me feel when people tell me they are enjoying this! Serious ego boost. Harry is easy to write. He's so sweet, and so utterly clueless when it comes to relationships, and so strong in every other way. Ron is a LOT of fun to write, you never know what he's going to say, or do. Really, sometimes it's written before I realize what he's going to say! Maura is really, REALLY difficult. Trust me, I'm having so much fun writing this, I'd write it if no one read it OR reviewed it (but don't tell THEM that!)

Saerry Snape: Wondrous? Really? Cool! I'm glad you're enjoying it. It's been a LOT of fun to write!

Merlindamage: Thanks for your great reviews. The connection of the two worlds is simply my fantasy – I wished for HP to be real, and... it was. In my mind, anyhow! Eliminating Sirius was one of the harder things I had to do, but I've governed myself for the inclusion of certain characters pretty strictly, and any that JKR has made a public statement about HER inclusion or treatment of (or reasons why, or why not) I've tried to eliminate, as I want the story to SOUND like it's really true. I eliminated Sirius because she once gave an interview telling about how she cried when "SHE" killed him off, and I left out Gilderoy Lockhart because she once said that he was the only character in the books who was fashioned after someone she knew.

As for the twins... I wanted them boring (for now ;-) and as "normal" as I could make them! And Snape? Well, Snape and Harry have had twenty years to come to an... understanding. I don't think he was ever that bad (underneath it all), but Harry is an adult now, and not looking at things in quite the same black and white/no shades of grey kind of way.

CQ

Chapter Ten: They're Everywhere!

At three thirty the next afternoon, Maura Kennedy walked into the head office of a major international tabloid newspaper. She approached the security desk, and the guard seated there, confidently, the heels of her three hundred dollar Italian shoes clicking against the marble of the floor.

She was dressed in a figure-hugging beige silk suit, and carried her Louis Vuitton attache case in her left hand. In short, she was dressed to kill.

"I'd like to see the editor, please."

"Do you have an appointment?" the young man asked her. "Is Mr Lewis expecting you?"

"No."

"Then I'm sorry, but you'll have to make one. Mr Lewis doesn't accept..."

"He'll see me," she stated, leaning over the desk and lifting the handset of the telephone there, handing it to him. "Tell him that Maura Kennedy has some information for him."

Thirty seconds later, Maura was being escorted to the twentieth floor by the embarrassed and stuttering guard.

"I'm sorry, Miss Kennedy...I didn't..."

"It's okay, really. Relax."

The young man blushed, and continued to stare forward as the doors to the elevator opened. They were greeted there by a petite brunette with large glasses.

"Miss Kennedy, if you'd follow me?"

Maura nodded, then cast a smile of thanks at the guard as the doors closed behind her. Poor kid. She followed the brunette around the

side of the building along a long glass corridor. On either side were large rooms full of people and computers. Some were on the phone, some typing madly away...Maura knew exactly what it was like to work in a room like that – her first four years as a journalist had been spent in a room much like it, but in the offices of the London Times.

“Mr Lewis?” The woman leading her said as she entered the large room at the end of the hallway. “Miss Kennedy has arrived.”

“Ah...Maura Kennedy,” the man sitting behind the large desk rose, holding out his hand to shake hers. He seemed to be somewhere in his mid to late fifties, with a bit of a paunch badly hidden by a horribly vibrant striped shirt. His greying hair was combed over the top of his head, and a little too long to be neat.

But he had a wonderful sparkle in his eyes, and Maura, while cautious, warmed to him.

“If anyone had asked me,” he continued, “who I would be welcoming into my office today, your esteemed self would have been absolute last on my list.”

“Is that right?” She asked, as she took a chair.

“To what do I owe the great honor of your visit?”

“To the fact that the editors of every mainstream daily in the western hemisphere appear to wish to keep their heads firmly wedged in their behinds, Mr Lewis.”

He looked stunned for a moment, then his eyes twinkled and he began to laugh.

“Oh, I do think we are going to like each other, Miss Kennedy.”

“I surely hope so, Mr Lewis, because I have a story that is about to change the world.”

“Well now, let's hear it.”

"I'd like a cup of coffee, if that could be managed? And you might like to have something a little stronger, you're going to need it. Oh, and you might want to cancel any further appointments for the day. This could take a while."

His eyes glinted with interest, "Let's talk terms."

Maura, who was fully aware that newspaper editors, as a rule, valued only what they paid dearly for, smiled. "Yes. Lets."

Ron was sitting on the couch, staring hard at the television screen. It wasn't turned on, but the screen reflected a great view of the front door behind him.

There were three empty ice cream containers litters around the room. He wondered, briefly, when the last time Maura had had a real meal was. She'd been home for two days. Had she eaten anything but ice cream in that time?

Standing, he made his way over to the tiny kitchenette. He looked for a moment at the incredibly sad-looking plant on her windowsill. Shaking his head, he turned on the faucet to give it a bit of water. As he lifted it down from the ledge, his fingers slipped over the rim of the pot. The soil was crunchy it was so dry.

Maura obviously didn't spend much time here.

After watering the plant, he returned it to its perch and then turned, opening the fridge. Inside, he saw three wilted carrots, a few apples and a carton of milk. He lifted the milk out and checked the expiry date.

Three months before. Gross. Dumping it in the trash container, he lifted out the bag and carried it down the hall to the garbage chute.

Back in her flat, he investigated the kitchen cupboards. They were as empty as her fridge. There were two cans of tuna and a packet of soda biscuits. Sighing, he opened the fridge freezer, not holding out much hope for the contents.

He stood there a moment, taking in what he saw. He was amazed. The three empty ice cream containers were explained. Before him were at least a dozen cartons of ice cream. The good stuff, too, not the supermarket variety.

Finally, he thought as he reached in, *a woman with her priorities straight.*

There were fourteen tube stops between the tabloid offices and her flat at Parsons Green. She then had a five minute walk to her building. By the time she put the key in the lock, she was exhausted.

I could have taken a cab, the thought. *I can certainly afford it now!*

She thought of the rather monstrous cheque currently residing in her handbag. Stephen Lewis had been very, very happy to sign it when he found out that, not only did she have names, dates, photographs, and irrefutable evidence, but she'd already written the articles.

Four of them. And with her by-line, the circulation of the tabloid would triple. Yes, Stephen Lewis was a very happy man.

What had surprised Maura more than anything, though, had been his willingness to believe her. About everything.

"You don't have my job, Maura, and not come to believe, without a doubt, that some things can't be denied. There is so much that *our* world can't explain, why not a magical world?"

He had agreed, without question, to publish contact information for people to use, which Maura had acquired with a quick call to Harry. Maura was thrilled. And then she opened her front door to find Ron Weasley eating ice cream from a carton, sitting on her couch.

"Ron?"

"Oh...Maura!" He stood.

She eyed the ice cream in his hands.

"Oh...I...sorry. I hope you don't mind, I helped myself. Harry asked me to wait for you...got peckish...."

"That's fine," she blushed, remembering what was, or rather was not, in her fridge. "There's not much..."

"No, never was a carrot man," he grinned. "You seem to keep the freezer well stocked, though."

"Yes, I..." she blushed even more. "Ice cream, when I write... bad habit."

Ron watched her as she stammered and blushed. Suddenly, he moved toward the kitchen, put the carton back in the freezer, and rinsed the spoon he'd been using.

"Harry wants to see you," he said, without turning.

"Oh, okay... I'll just get changed then..."

Ron turned then, and watched her go, then stood waiting for her to return. She reentered the room five minutes later, dressed in jeans and a clingy yellow sweater. She grabbed a leather jacket from the closet and threw it on as she stepped into leather trainers. Lacing them up, she grabbed the briefcase she'd been carrying and stepped over to him.

"Apparate or tube?" she asked.

"Apparate," Ron said, stepping up to her, then behind. He wrapped his left arm tightly around her middle, which was difficult as he stood about a foot taller than she. His hand managed to brush the bottom of her right breast as he held her.

"Think of Potter Manor, Harry's study," he said, in a rather surprised and strangled voice.

Before Maura could think of anything, she felt the weightless feeling of apparating again, and was suddenly standing in Harry's study with Ron's arms securely around her.

Harry glanced up at them, his eyes glinting as he saw who it was,

“Ron, Maura.” He nodded.

“Sorry, Harry, had to wait.” said Ron, quickly letting his arms fall from around her.

“And eat my ice cream,” she commented, stepping away from him.

“Well, if you'd keep anything else worth eating in your flat...”

“Why? I don't eat there.”

“For guests,” he shot back.

“I don't have guests, Ron.”

For some reason, Harry thought Ron looked rather happy at that.

“Maura,” Harry stood. “Any luck?”

“Well, as I told Ron last night, no reputable paper will even talk to me now. However, I took Ron's advice and approached a well known tabloid.”

“And?”

“And, Stephen Lewis, the editor, was more than happy to print. And more than happy to sign a rather large cheque, as well.” She handed the cheque to Harry.

“A cheque?” Ron asked suspiciously.

“People value what they pay for, Ron.”

“Oh...”

“And apparently he values us a whole lot,” Harry commented, whistling at the amount.

He held it out to Maura, who shook her head.

"I want you to use that for the war, Harry."

"We're very well funded, Maura. We don't need to take your money."

"Then use it to support the children who are going to be orphaned, or some safe houses, or whatever. I don't want it."

Harry looked at her for a moment, then silently put the cheque in the top drawer of his desk.

"So, what can you tell me?"

"What can you tell me? What made you hang up on me after I told you about Philip Mahood?"

"Philip Mahood?" Ron spat. "What's that ruddy git..."

"Hold up, Ron," Harry held up a hand to silence his friend. "Let Maura finish."

"Well?" she asked.

"I had to confirm a few things. Ron, can you call in your brothers and your Dad?"

Half a minute later, Bill, Charlie and Arthur Weasley were seated in front of them.

"Maura, can you tell me what you've managed?"

"Well, I spent most of last night researching a few things on the internet. I sent you copies..."

Harry nodded.

"There are three cells of the Al Quaida organization in the UK that use... well, no one knows how they appear or disappear. They were once one cell, but have since grown and split.

"This is their mark..." she pulled out a paper and handed it to Harry, who looked at it, then passed it around. "They are all tattooed with it on the right forearm."

When the Weasley men saw the picture, they all gasped.

"I approached Stephen Lewis today. He's the editor of the largest tabloid in England. No one more... reputable... would even talk to me after I told them..." Maura swallowed. "Anyhow, I approached Stephen with all my research and four written articles. He agreed to publish immediately. What's more..."

"What?" Harry's eyes flashed to hers. He'd picked up on the tone of her voice, and it didn't sound good.

"Well, it was really strange. He believes me, Harry. I got the impression that it's not... the fact of your world wasn't a surprise to him."

Harry's eyes slid to Bill. Bill nodded, and stood, silently leaving the room.

"Go on."

"He gave me a disgusting amount of money for it all. The first story will run in tomorrow's edition."

Harry considered this for a moment, then looked at her. "You're getting the by-line?"

"Yes. It was a condition he set. My name is... well known."

"Yes, of course," Harry stood and walked to the window. "You'll have to come back here, then, Maura."

"What? Why?"

"Once your name is involved publicly, you'll be a target. We can't keep you safe at your flat. You'll be safe here."

"But..."

"You're not a prisoner. But you're going to have to live here for a little while."

"How long?"

“Until the war is over.”

Maura sighed. “I want to be involved, Harry.”

“Of course you'll be involved. That won't change. We'll just make this your base of operations.”

She nodded, saying nothing for a moment. Then, “Okay.”

Right then, Bill returned, and Harry looked up at him.

“Well?”

“Class of sixty eight.”

“Damn,” Harry said. “What house?”

Bill grinned, “Gryffindor.”

“Well, well,” Harry smiled. “Get me Snape.”

“Harry?” Maura was confused, but Harry shook his head at her and paced behind his desk, obviously lost in thought.

It only seemed like a matter of minutes, but must have been at least a quarter of an hour, before the door was opened, and Snape strode through, his black robes flying out behind him.

“Harry?”

“Severus,” Harry held out his hand to shake. “Thanks for coming so quickly. We have a situation that I'm hoping you can help us get a better handle on.”

Snape glanced around the room at the congregation of Weasley men, and the single woman there. His eyes moved back to Harry.

“What now?”

“What can you tell me about Stephen Lewis?”

"Well, there is a name that I haven't heard in a while," Snape smiled unpleasantly. "And had hoped to never hear again."

They all waited.

"He was a year behind your father and I," he explained. "Good student. Fearless. And an incurable gossip. If there wasn't a rumor to be told, he'd start one. He was a particular favorite of the divination professor, as I remember. So tell me, what has the little git gone and done?"

Harry grinned, handing over a glass of amber liquid. Snape eyed it suspiciously before accepting it.

"Granted us admittance to the muggle world." Harry said.

"Bollocks," said Snape, shocked. He downed the liquid in the glass in a single gulp, then handed the empty glass back to Harry, who quickly refilled it.

"Can we trust him, Severus?"

Snape thought for a moment, then nodded decisively. "Yes. Yes, I think we can."

"Good then. Let's discuss Philip Mahood, then."

Snape choked on his whiskey. Maura wished she had some to choke on.

Okay, so I know it was shorter, but it's just to tide over my readers until I get back from my road trip. I promise, I will write nightly and hope to have several chapters ready to post to you next week.

Thanks so much to my reviewers!

CQ

texasjeanette: Thanks, I'm really enjoying writing this, I just hope I don't begin to annoy people with frequent updates!

Saerry Snape: I've never seen that series – I don't watch a lot of tv (two boys under 12!!) and what I do watch tends to be limited to Discovery Channel and Survivor! I will check it out online though.

James: Nya nya! But I don't have hero status!

Merlindamage: BTW, cool handle... The integration of technology into the wizarding world was one of the first things I made sure I had in the story. I can't imagine anyone as intelligent as Harry living without the basics of technology.

Shotgunn: Harry was definitely reminded of Hermione when Maura showed her research compulsion. After all, that is one of the qualities that Hermione's character centred around.

Azntgr01: Okay, I can normally deduce what people's handles mean, but yours has me stumped! I do intend to tell the full story of the final battle and the loss of Hermione and Dumbledore, but right now, it's a very sensitive thing for both Harry and Ron. I just don't think they're ready to talk about it yet. But they will, I promise. And as for H/G...we'll see in the next chapter...I think ;-}

GiGiFanfic: James Milamber is a sweetheart. I was getting NO traffic on my story until he recommended it, and I will be eternally grateful to him for it! Thanks for your kind comments – next chapter will be in a weeks time!

Mountain: I don't care – just keep the reviews coming! I love knowing that people are reading this – it's really a wonderful feeling!

CQ

Chapter Eleven: Family

Maura Kennedy's first foray into tabloid journalism was an unqualified success. The first article ran the next day, as promised, and almost immediately, calls started pouring in. Many of the people calling, in Maura's opinion, were raving nutcases, but a few – more than a few – were simply ordinary people with bad feelings about the state of the world, and a glimmer of hope that things could be different.

Harry had provided her with a work room, and Ron had somehow moved most of the things from her flat into it. She had her couch and television set up in a corner where she could watch the newschannels, and her entire work area, which he had somehow managed to move without shifting a single sheet of paper. And in the corner opposite to the television stood her refrigerator. He'd removed the moldy fruit and vegetables, but the freezer was well stocked with her favorite brand of ice cream.

And she had telephones. Three of them, which were currently ringing off the hook.

After the first hour of answering calls, taking names and contact information, and promising that someone would come to speak to the caller, Maura gave up trying to keep up and bellowed from the doorway for reinforcements. Molly, Ginny, Janie and Amelia were all begged for help and the five women, between them, came up with a schedule to keep both the house and Maura's new office running smoothly.

With three extra families in the house, they required a full time housekeeper. Molly happily offered to take over the running of the house, to leave Ginny free to help Maura full time. Ginny was more than happy to hand over the running of things to her mother. She'd been quiet and introspective, almost brooding, since the attacks, and it was beginning to worry everyone.

Janie and Amelia happily began answering the phones, and Maura sighed with relief. With the two Weasley sisters-in-law taking information, and Ginny organizing people to follow up the calls, she was left free to write more articles for Stephen Lewis' tabloid.

And it all worked fine. At least, until the first mail delivery, on Maura's second day after returning to Harry's home, the first day after the publication of the article in *The Sun*.

The post office called that morning, quite early, Maura thought. They were informed that they needed to come and pick up their mail immediately. Maura thought this strange, as she'd never known the Royal Mail to be overly concerned with the time of day that one emptied their box, but complied, asking Ginny if she would be so kind as to run down to the office and bring back the mail.

Ginny, also thinking it odd, headed out, her wand handy, because she had an odd feeling about this. Maura was surprised when her friend returned, quite quickly, in a taxi. As a matter of fact, Ginny nearly fell out of it she was laughing so hard. It was so good to see her laughing for a change that Maura didn't notice, for a moment, the taxi driver who got out to help unload the bags and bags of mail. Seven huge canvas sacks of it, actually. Ginny was giggling so hard she had tears running down her face.

The sound of the two women's laughter drew the men from the house. Harry and Bill stood, smiling, while Ron stepped up next to Maura on the front walk. He grinned down at her.

"Told you so," he said in an undertone.

"Yes. You did," Maura whispered back, looking up at him, smiling and shaking her head. If this was an indication of the response they were going to get, they were going to need more people.

Harry stepped forward, and paid the disgruntled-looking taxi driver, who suddenly stopped looking disgruntled when he noticed the number of bills Harry was handing him.

Nothing strange as folk, he thought as he drove away.

"Gin? What's wrong?"

Ginny turned from where she'd been staring out the kitchen window into the darkness of the back garden to see Harry leaning in the doorway.

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong?" he asked again. "You've been so quiet."

"Oh, Harry," she smiled sadly. "I'm just being a mum. I miss my girls, and I want them here with me."

"They're perfectly safe at Hogwarts."

"They're not entirely safe anywhere unless I'm with them, Harry."

"Bill and I..." Harry started, then pushed away from the door frame and came across the room towards her. "We reinforced all the wards in Hogwarts, Gin'. We wanted the girls to be safe, and Fred and George's kids, and eventually Charlie's. We took no chances. Not with anything."

"What about yours, Harry?"

"Mine?" He frowned. "My what?"

"Your children."

"Gin'..."

"You should find someone, Harry. Settle down. Have babies."

"I don't think that that is in my future, Ginny," he said quietly.

"It should be," she smiled over her shoulder at him, then turned back to the window. "It should be. Then, maybe, you'd understand why I want them here with me."

Harry felt helpless. He knew she was right, that he didn't fully understand, and that he couldn't unless he had children of his own.

"I love the girls, too, Ginny. Not like you do, of course, they're... they're not mine. But I would do anything to keep them safe. I made

as many modifications as I could possibly think of to the wards at the school. They're safer in Hogwarts than they would be... anywhere."

"No, they're not, Harry." Ginny said. "They're safest when they're here, with us. No one at Hogwarts is willing to die for them."

Harry sighed. "Meg is in fifth year, Gin'. She's got her OWLs at the end of the year..."

"And," Ginny turned to look fully at him. "She'll be first out through those doors if Hogwarts is attacked, Harry. You know that."

Harry sighed again, he didn't like feeling like this, like he was keeping her separated from her babies. "You're their mother, Ginny. It's your decision."

"It's your home, Harry." Ginny looked surprised. "I wouldn't bring them here without your consent!"

Harry looked at her, dumbfounded. "Ginny, this is your home, too. You're not a guest here..."

"Harry, Potter Manor is... *Potter* Manor. I'm your housekeeper."

Harry was, quite literally, speechless. He drew a breath, looking directly into Ginny's brown eyes. "I never realized that you thought of yourself as... Ginny, you are *not* my housekeeper."

"Harry, I live in your home to keep it running smoothly for you. You pay me a wage to do this. What else would you call me?"

"You're my friend, you're... you're family!"

"You don't pay family, Harry."

"Ginny, I never..."

"Harry, it's okay. Really. I've accepted that role. It's okay."

"Ginny, I don't want you to be... you're *not* my..." He stopped and took a deep breath. "You're *not* an employee!"

"If I'm not an employee, Harry, then what would you call me?"

Harry stared hard at her for a moment. "I told you, you're my friend..."

Then, with a strangled sound, he took one more step towards her and pulled her to him.

"You're my sanity, Ginny Weasley," he stated in a low, gruff voice, then, surprising both of them, he leaned down, and kissed her.

"Oh!" Maura had been on her way to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. The scene she'd just walked in on put all thoughts of tea completely out of her head. She pulled back into the hallway and leaned against the wall.

Harry was kissing Ginny in the kitchen. And Ginny was kissing him back. They both appeared completely oblivious to anything going on around them, including Maura walking in on them.

"What's up?"

Maura looked up to see Ron sticking his head out through the study door.

"Sorry?"

"I thought I heard you say something?" He lifted his eyebrows. "Maura? You okay?"

"I..." Maura pushed herself away from the wall and moved towards him. "I guess I was just surprised at what I just saw..."

"Why? What did you see?" Ron's posture changed. He went from fully relaxed to stiffly ready to take on anything, his hand reaching for his wand as he stepped out into the hall and around her to be between her and the kitchen door.

She glanced back at the door and then up to him. In a whisper, she said, "They're kissing in there!"

Ron's brow furrowed. "Kissing? Who?"

"Harry, and Ginny!"

Ron's eyes widened, then took on a definite gleam. When he spoke again, it was also in a whisper. "Really?"

Maura nodded. "And they didn't seem to notice... me. Or anything else, for that matter."

Ron grinned suddenly. "Well, it's about bloody time."

Maura turned a surprised look on him.

"What?" Ron said, pulling her with him into the den. "They've been tiptoeing around each other for years. Ginny's been wild about him forever."

"You knew?"

"Maura, you could hardly have seen them together at Hogwarts and *not* known. We knew..." he swallowed, glancing at her, his voice took on a note of pain. "Hermione and I... we thought they'd marry right out of school, but then Voldemort... and Dean..."

"But why didn't Harry fight for her, if he loved her?"

"Harry's got a noble streak a mile wide, in case you hadn't noticed." Ron shook his head.

"...*I don't poach...*" She heard his voice telling her that day at Hogwarts.

"And Harry..." Ron sighed. "Until Voldemort was defeated, he thought he didn't have a right to be happy, or endanger Ginny. And after, well... It was a while until Harry got over the fact that he'd killed someone, taken a life, even if it was Voldemort..."

"He never thought he was worthy of her." she stated, suddenly understanding.

"I don't know if he even does now," Ron said. "You know how..."

"What?"

"Well, Harry makes out that his aunt and uncle weren't that bad, but, well, I've met them, and it's a bloody wonder he came out of that house as good as he did. I don't know if Harry knows how to love, like that, anyhow."

Maura smiled sadly, "Do any of us, Ron?"

His blue eyes studied her for a moment. "Maybe not, but some of us get better role models than others."

Back in the kitchen, Harry slowly pulled back from the kiss.

"Harry?" Ginny whispered, confused.

"I'm sorry, Gin'. I..." He swallowed hard, then took a deep breath. "No, I'm not sorry. I'm not sorry at all. I've wanted to do that for a very long time."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because I didn't want to lose you. Because having you here means so much to me, I never wanted you to feel pressured. I didn't want to endanger what I had of you..." he sighed. "I don't want you to feel... You'll always have a home here, Ginny. I know you don't feel that way about me, and I don't want you to feel uncomfortable..."

"Who says I don't?" she smiled up at him. Harry felt it wash over him, that smile that had consistently turned his world upside down every time he'd seen it since he was sixteen years old and wised up to what had been under his nose for five years. His startled green eyes met her calm chocolate brown ones.

"Ginny?"

"Harry, I've always felt *that way* about you."

"Ginny?" His gruff whisper told her that he was quickly losing what little self control he had had.

"I've always loved you, Harry Potter. For years. And I've felt guilty about it for years, as well, because I thought you didn't see me that way."

"But..."

"I married Dean because I knew..." she sighed. "You're going to think I'm a horrible person."

"I could never think that of you, Ginny. Never."

"Oh, yes, you will," she looked up at him. "But I have to tell you. Just please understand that I was always completely honest with Dean. Maybe I wasn't fair to him, but I was *a/ways* honest. He knew I didn't... couldn't love him."

"Then why on earth did you marry him?" Harry's voice was full of pain.

"Because I thought that I'd never have the one I *did* love. You had told me... that you couldn't be with me..."

"Ginny!" Harry cried, pulling her back into his arms. "I didn't mean *forever*! Dear God, Ginny... I meant until I could be sure that you'd be safe with me! When you married Dean... I thought... I thought that you'd never really cared about me at all, that I'd been some... teenage thing..."

"Oh, Harry," she said quietly, "you were never that!"

He buried his face in her hair, and she clung to him. Eighteen years of pain were gone in the blink of an eye.

"Do you think it's safe to go in there yet?" Maura asked from her seat on the couch. She was staring directly into the fire.

"I don't know," Ron said from his seat beside her. "But I wish they'd bloody hurry up. I'm starving here."

"Come on," Harry pulled away and took her hand.

"Where are we going?" Ginny asked as they headed for the fireplace.

"To Hogwarts."

"Harry?"

"You want our girls home, then our girls are coming home."

"Oh, Harry!" She threw her arms around him. "Thank you, thank you!"

"But I have to tell you, Ginny, they *are* safe there. And I want you to agree to talk to them about it, okay?"

"Okay," she nodded eagerly.

"So, we'll bring them home, and you'll discuss it?"

"We'll discuss it together, Harry."

"And if they want to go back?"

"I'll try and convince them otherwise, of course," she grinned.

Harry smiled down at her, "I love you, Ginny."

Her breath caught. After so many years, she'd never thought she'd hear him say that.

"I love you too, Harry Potter."

Professor Minerva McGonagall had seen some surprising things in her time, but walking into her office in the middle of the night to find Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley...er, Thomas... in a clinch was probably one of the most startling things she'd witnessed.

Certainly, as head of Gryffindor House, she had been aware of their fondness for each other. She even admitted to being mildly disappointed when their short-lived... very short lived... romantic entanglement in Harry's sixth year had ended.

But in the years since, she had all but convinced herself it had merely been one of those... teenage things. Merlin knew, there were enough

overactive hormones in this school, especially when the students hit about sixteen...

"Well, Mr Potter, I think ten points from Gryffindor ought to do it?" she remarked dryly as she advanced into the office, hiding a smile as the two jumped about like guilty teenagers. She loved doing that.

"Min...Professor...I..."

"Minerva," Ginny smiled, "You are aware that we're no longer students here, aren't you?"

"Are you telling me, Miss Weasley, that the two of you never got up to... that... and subsequently enjoyed the benefits of *not* being caught? Perhaps in a certain third floor broom closet?"

Ginny and Harry glanced at each other, guilt and embarrassment washing over them, both remembering that night.

"Professor," Harry began.

"Minerva McGonagall!" Ginny cried. "How did you know about that?"

"I was a student here once, myself, my dear. And Mr Potter isn't the only one with a charmed map of the school that shows some... interesting things."

Ginny squeaked. Harry grinned.

"Now, what can I do for the two of you at..." she glanced at the clock on the wall. "...one o'clock in the morning?"

Ginny took a breath and looked to Harry.

"Well, you can get the girls for us, Minerva." Harry stated quietly.

"The girls?" Minerva raised her eyebrows. "Is there a problem?"

"I'd like to take my daughters home with me for a couple of days, Minerva." Ginny explained. "There are some things going on which I need to discuss with them."

"Mr Potter," Minerva turned to him, "Is there anything that I, as headmistress of this school, and a member of the Order, should know?"

"Minerva, everything is fine. Ginny just needs the girls to be close for a couple of days. I assure you, it's a... personal situation that Ginny needs to discuss with them."

Professor McGonagall's eyebrows arched as she glanced back to Ginny. "Indeed?"

After a moment, she turned back to Harry. "I understand that you and Bill Weasley have been inspecting the wards on the school. Does that have anything to do with this unexpected visit?"

"Minerva," Harry put a hand on her arm. "This is not a question of the safety of Hogwarts. Bill and I have made every possible modification to keep your students safe. I... all students at Hogwarts are as safe as it is possible to be. There is no place more secure, I assure you."

"Very well, Mr Potter, Mrs Thomas. I would like it to be understood that this may not be a security issue for you, but others may well look upon it as such, from the outside. The lack of faith in Hogwarts security of two people of your... stature... in our community... well, I wouldn't want it to be common knowledge that your children, Ginny, are out of the school?"

"I don't want anyone to know that, either, Minerva. I'm taking them home for... a short while, on a personal issue."

"Very well, then," she said, after a moment. "Come with me."

They walked through the dimly lit stone corridors towards the entrance of the Gryffindor tower. As they walked, Harry smiled. He wondered if, by some chance, they were even now being watched by a student out past curfew who was lucky enough to own an invisibility cloak.

"Where is it?' Ginny asked suddenly, in an undertone.

"What?"

"Your cloak. I haven't seen it in years."

Harry was stunned. "How do you do that? How do you know what I'm thinking about?"

"It's not that hard, Mr Potter. You've been peering into shadowy alcoves, and I was under it a time or two with you *in* those shadowy alcoves, so..."

"It's in my old Hogwarts trunk in my closet." He grinned. He was amazed that their connection was still so strong.

"Here we are," McGonagall stopped in front of a set of double doors and waved her hand in front of it, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like "lemon drops". The doors opened, admitting the trio into the common room of Gryffindor tower.

"Mr Potter, if you would be so kind as to wait here, Ginny and I will rouse the girls."

Harry nodded, already drawn to the room, one which he hadn't been in since he graduated, seventeen years before.

Each year, students added several framed photos to the walls. Harry automatically walked over to the wall between the huge fireplace and the long windows. Looking up, he smiled. There it was. Taken nineteen years before, when they were in fifth year... Dear God, they looked so young!

Harry and Ron stood, arms around each other, with Hermione sitting between them, raised on their shoulders. Colin Creavy had taken the shot. It had been right after a Quidditch match in which they had soundly kicked the collective butt of Slytherin house. Ron and Harry still wore their Quidditch uniforms. They were dirty and beaten up, Ron had the beginnings of a black eye where the Quaffle had clipped the star Keeper. Ron *never* let one past him, even if he had to stop it with his face.

Yes, they were dirty, but victorious. But Hermione, wearing muggle jeans and sweater, with her Gryffindor scarf wound around her neck, looked perfect.

Her hair was wildly flying around her face, and she had a look of shock and mild fear on her face... and complete joy. As Harry remembered it, he and Ron had come up behind her and hoisted her up before she knew what was happening, just as Colin turned and took the photo.

They'd been so incredibly young then.

Hearing soft footsteps on the stairs to the girls dorms, Harry turned. Meg, Ginny's eldest, came down, pulling her trunk along behind her.

"Uncle Harry?" There was mild fear in her voice. "What's going on? What's happened?"

"Meggie, it's fine. Everyone is okay."

"Then why are you and Mum here in the middle of the bloody night?"

Harry smiled. Meg was so like her Uncle Ron in so many ways.

"We'll explain everything the minute we get home. I promise. Just trust me, okay?" He pulled her to him and hugged her tightly.

"Uncle Harry, I'm scared," she whispered.

"No reason to be, munchkin. Your mum and I would never let anything hurt you."

"I'm not scared for me..."

"I promise you, nothing is wrong, Meg. Believe me?"

"Okay. Are Grams and Grandpa okay?"

"Everyone is fine, and you'll see them all at home."

"Everyone is at the house?"

"Everyone but your Uncle Fred and Uncle George and their families."

"Why?"

"Because it's safe there, Meg."

Meg studied him for a moment. She knew full well that he'd never lied to her, but she also knew that he had a thing about not saying everything, either.

For a moment, he looked into her brown eyes, so like her mother's, then he smiled. He was about to say something when they heard Ginny's whispered voice.

"Megan?"

"Here, mum." She held on to Harry, who kept an arm around her as four people returned to the common room.

Ginny and Minerva were closely followed by Mary and Maddy, thirteen and just twelve respectively, and in third and first years.

When they saw Harry, they both ran forward to hug him. He wrapped his arms around all three girls and hugged them close.

"Uncle Harry! How come you're here? Why are we going home?" Maddy would have continued with her questions had Meg not shushed her.

Harry smiled down at the tiny redhead, She was the walking image of Ginny in her first year, but where Ginny had had freckles, Maddy's skin was perfectly smooth and clear. She was an absolute beauty.

"Uncle Harry said he'd explain everything when we get home," Meg said. "Now shush up until you're told otherwise."

"May I suggest," Minerva said as they exited the tower, "that you use my floo instead of walking out to the gates?"

"Thank you, Minerva." Harry smiled tiredly at his old professor. "The sooner I get them home the better, I think."

"Mr Potter," Minerva looked over her half-moon glasses at him. "I do expect you will call me? Tomorrow?"

"Absolutely, Minerva. I will call you first thing."

Their arrival back at Potter Manor went reasonably unnoticed. Ron was still up, and kissed his nieces before turning an inquiring look to Harry.

"I'll explain tomorrow, really, Ron. You should be in bed."

"With you and Ginny both gone without a word? Don't think so, mate."

"Sorry about that, I didn't think. I need to talk to the girls for a minute. Can we talk in the morning?"

"You're safe?"

"Yes."

"Everything's fine? Nothing I should know about?"

"Plenty, but nothing that won't keep until morning."

Ron studied him for a moment, then nodded once, quickly. "Right then, I'm off."

Harry watched as he disappeared up the stairs towards his own rooms on the third floor. Until a voice from behind him interrupted his thoughts.

"Uncle Harry? What's going on?"

Harry turned, with a smile, not quite sure how he was going to explain to Ginny's daughters the new relationship he hoped to have with their mother.

As Ron bounded up the stairs, a head popped out of a doorway in the hall to his left.

"Ron?"

"Maura, I thought you were asleep."

"No. I'm worried about Harry and Ginny. I can't sleep."

"They're back. Everything is fine," he assured her.

"They're back? But where did they go?"

"They went to Hogwarts. They brought the girls back."

"But why? Harry said Hogwarts was the safest place for them right now..."

"It is. I don't know what's going on, but Harry said he'd explain in the morning."

"Oh, well..." Maura glanced back over her shoulder, then back to Ron. "I guess I'll see them... then. I...I should get to bed..."

"Yes. We both should," he nodded, but he made no move to leave and head towards his own rooms.

"Well... goodnight."

"Goodnight, Maura," he whispered as she closed her door softly, leaving him to go quietly up the next set of stairs, alone.

To my wonderful, wonderful reviewers....

Saerry Snape: *Thanks – I'm enjoying this! Julianna Margulies, huh? I loved her in ER...I'm going to have to get my hands on a copy of this series – thanks!*

GiGiFanfic: *Romance keeps you young, you know! I wish there were a firm end to it, but the premise of the books by JKR (IMHO) is that there is NEVER an end to it, even if the players change. After all, Dumbledore defeated Grindewald, and that was supposed to be the end, but all the while, Tom Riddle was at Hogwarts, learning to become the next "great evil".*

James Milamber: *Okay, "hero" it is. Startling suspicion? Hmm...I'll have to look into that... You tend to be far too insightful for your own good, you know. Killing off Dumbledore was really, REALLY hard, but you'll see why when I explain myself. Trust me, the story wouldn't*

have happened without it. Thanks again, you know your reviews keep me going!

Merlindamage: *Thanks, Lewis was a lot more fun than I thought he'd be. I envisioned him originally as this side character who is needed to advance the plot, and then, lo and behold, his eyes twinkled at me... and suddenly he had a personality. He believed so quickly because he KNOWS... he graduated Hogwarts the year after James Potter.*

Shotgunn: *Thanks, Shotgunn, I appreciate it. I've been wondering if I should include the name of the tabloid or just keep it one of those details that are "assumed"...we'll see. Do I have to make mention of page three if I do include it? ;-}*

azntgr01: *By "handle" I mean your name... sorry, child of the seventies here – CB radios and all that... okay, now I'm rambling AND showing my age, bad combination, I know. Lewis wasn't GOING to be a wizard... it just kind of, well, happened. And then it felt right, and now he's working his way into the story. It's all because his eyes twinkled at me, I SWEAR IT!*

Dkandmax: *Thanks – I like the twist myself. I was talking to my son (who is also a huge HP fan) and he asked me what I thought the world would be like if a magical world really DID exist – and I thought, well... and here is the product of my VERY active imagination (not to mention my very active fantasy life... but that's another story entirely....) James' recommendation has sent a LOT of readers my way, and I can't tell you how thankful I am!*

Lizliterarius: *Thanks, I rather thought that would be a "Dumbledore" kind of thing to do!*

Pirate grIEe: *Thanks, I've been away for the last week, but I usually update a little more often ;-*

Larna Mandrea: *Thanks for the kind words. This is a first for me, so I suffer from extreme lack of confidence. It's nice to see people enjoying it!*

CQ

Chapter 13: Finding a Future

Harry sat at his desk, his head in his hands, and considered the conversation of the night before.

Ginny's girls were nothing if not determined. Meg was determined to return to Hogwarts, Mary was determined to stay, and Maddy had crawled up into his lap, told him she'd go wherever he wanted her to, and promptly fell asleep, stealing his heart for the four hundred and twenty second time since her birth twelve years before.

Later, he and Ginny had escorted the girls to their rooms, and then stood for ages in the hallway outside of her room.

Like teenagers, he thought.

But they'd agreed that, with the girls there, it would be inappropriate for them to be caught in the same room... quite yet.

Harry was determined to make that 'yet' very short-lived.

Which caused him to consider another conversation he had to take part in today. One he was as nervous as a schoolboy about.

Taking a deep breath, he exited his den and headed for the kitchens. He fumbled absently in his pocket as he pushed the door open. "Molly?"

"In here, Harry!" Molly called from the pantry.

"Could I speak to you for a moment?"

"Of course, Harry," Molly came out holding several cans and packets. "What is it, love?"

"Is Arthur around?"

"He's in the garden. Shall I get him?"

"Yes... please... if you wouldn't mind? Could I speak to the two of you in my office?"

“Of course,” Molly studied him, concerned. “We’ll be there in a moment.”

As she headed to the back door to call in her husband, Harry headed back to his office. By the time Molly and Arthur joined him, he was in a cold sweat.

“Harry?” Arthur glanced between Harry and his wife as Harry cast a silencing charm on the room and indicated for them to sit down. “Everything okay?”

“I’d like to discuss something with the two of you...”

“Of course, Harry,” Molly perched on the edge of her chair. “What on earth has you so upset?”

“I’m not upset, Molly. I just...” Harry swallowed nervously, then fumbled in his pocket for a moment before pulling out the item he had placed there earlier that day.

It was a ring. An emerald set in a gold band. Harry took a deep breath, and spoke.

“This was my mother’s engagement ring. I’ve carried it around for... a while now. It’s an emerald. My father bought it, according to Remus, to match my mother’s eyes.”

Molly and Arthur glanced at each other, then back to Harry.

“I’m thirty five. I never thought I’d marry...” Harry continued. “You two have been special to me. Since I met Ron... you’ve been family, like parents.”

“Harry?” Molly smiled gently, “Are you telling us you’ve met someone that you’re considering asking to marry you?”

“Only if you and Arthur agree,” Harry confirmed, looking Molly in the eye.

“Harry,” Arthur smiled. “You’re like a son to us, you know that. But you don’t need our approval to get married.”

"In this case, I believe it's... traditional, Arthur. I have a great deal of respect for both of you, and I wanted to do this properly..."

"Ginny." Molly stated softly. "You want to marry our Ginny."

Harry swallowed again, his nerves shot. "Yes, ma'am. If you and Arthur agree."

"Harry!" Arthur smiled. "As Ron would say, it's about bloody time."

Harry's eyebrows rose with shock.

"Oh, love!" Molly laughed. "We've always known how you and Ginny felt about each other! We actually tried to... well, to discourage her from accepting Dean. We knew... well, it wasn't meant to be. But we thought for sure that after Dean's death, when she told us that you had offered her a home..."

Harry's face contorted into a look of horror. "There hasn't been...we're not...!"

"Of course not, Harry. We know," Arthur grinned. "We know. But we're happy you've found each other at last. Ginny is a grown woman, and quite capable of making her own decisions. You don't need our approval."

"All the same, I'd like to know I have it."

"Of course you do!" Molly cried, standing and rushing around Harry's desk to hug him tightly. "We couldn't be happier!"

"Harry," Arthur stood, holding out his hand for Harry to shake. "You've always taken care of her, we're grateful for that. We only wish... well, we were so sure years ago that... You've always been part of this family, Harry. As Molly said, we couldn't be happier."

Harry grinned, "Let's just hope that the girls feel the same way."

Molly's face glowed. "You're going to speak to the girls?"

"Of course."

"You know that if Ginny gets wind of this you're life won't be worth a plug nickel, don't you son?" Arthur inquired with a fatherly smile.

"Her temper is legendary," Harry agreed. "But I've messed up so badly in past with her... this time, I'm doing it right."

"Harry, love, you've never 'messed up', badly or otherwise. Sometimes... well, sometimes fate decides things for us. Steers us down paths that otherwise we would never consider taking. And sometimes, we accept less than we need, rather than live with nothing at all."

Molly's words brought a lump to his throat. "I know, Molly. And I swear to you that Ginny will never have reason to believe that she has to settle for less than she wants ever again."

After shaking Arthur's hand again, and releasing the privacy charms on the room, Harry went in search of Ron.

"Hey, mate," Ron said as he entered the house through the front door as Harry went through the front hall, intending to look for him upstairs.

Ron had several bags in one hand, all bearing the name of a famous Saville Row mens shop.

"Shopping?" Harry smiled, eyebrows raised.

"Well, you know... I needed some new things..."

"You mean you *chose* to go? Ginny didn't have to drag you there?"

Ron's ears went pink. "Nothing wrong with a bloke wanting to look halfway decent, is there?"

"Hmmm," Harry grinned knowingly. "Of course not. If you can spare me a few moments away from your preening, I need to speak with you."

"Preening? You bloody git..." Ron followed him into his office.

As they entered the room, Ron stopped and stood still as he watched Harry place the privacy charms again, then begin to pace back and forth in front of the huge fireplace. Ron's senses immediately went on full alert. He placed his bags on the leather sofa and sat down, his elbows on his spread knees, and hands clasped between, feet planted firmly on the floor.

"Okay, what's going on?" he asked.

Harry stopped pacing, and glanced at his friend, then began pacing again.

"Do you remember..."

"Oh, no," Ron leaned back against the back of the sofa. "I never like a conversation that starts with that. Unless we're drunk. And, while I'll admit to stopping for a single pint on my way home, I am not drunk."

Harry smiled, then moved to sit in the leather wingback chair across from his friend.

"Ron, do you remember sixth year?"

"Well, certain parts of it are a bit hazy, like the night of the Halloween ball...where the hell Seamus got that firewhiskey..."

Harry silenced him with a look.

"Okay," Ron nodded. "I remember sixth year. What about it?"

"Well, Ginny and I..."

"Ah... now we get to it. Yes, Harry, I know that you were snogging my sister senseless for the vast majority of the spring of our sixth year. What of it?"

"Well... I messed up. royally. I told her I couldn't be with her, because she wouldn't be safe, and well..."

"You told me that she dumped you." Ron looked at him dangerously. Harry sighed.

"Well, I thought she had. What I meant when I told her that was that I didn't want to endanger her with a public relationship until Voldemort was... no longer a threat to her."

"And?"

"And it seems that she thought I was dumping her, and turned to Dean. When she started seeing him, being the blind idiot that I was..."

"And that some of us think you still are."

"Well, to make a long story short, when she turned to Dean, thinking that I didn't want her, I thought she was giving me the brush off..."

"You daft git," Ron said. "you mean to tell me that you never *talked* to her about it?"

"No. I assumed..."

"You assumed too damned much from the sound of it, Harry!"

"I know," Harry admitted. "And it cost me years of being with her. But I... Ron, you're my best friend. Ginny and I talked last night, and I know what I want, and I think that it's what she wants, too, but... you're my best friend, and you're her brother, and I'd like to know that you're... okay with it."

"With what, exactly?" Ron asked, pretty sure he knew... no, *certain* he knew, but wanting to make Harry sweat a bit.

"Ron, I want to ask Ginny to be my wife."

Ron watched him closely through narrowed eyes for a moment, then stood, suddenly thrusting out his hand to shake. "About bloody time you came to your senses, you daft bugger."

Harry smiled and shook his hand. "Thank you."

"Hurt her and I swear to Merlin I'll make sure that you regret the day you were born."

Harry's smile widened. "I think you would have to get in line. But as it's never going to happen, it's not an issue."

"Make sure of it." Ron nodded. "Now, what are you waiting for? Go talk to the woman!"

"Nope. Got one more stop to make first."

"The ring?"

"No, I've got that," Harry pulled his mother's emerald from his pocket. "I need to make sure that the girls are okay with it before I talk to Ginny."

Ron grinned, "Can I watch?"

Harry turned, confused. "Watch me talk to the girls?"

"Nope. I want a front row seat when Ginny finds out that you've been talking to everyone but her about this."

"Funny, your Dad said something similar when I talked to him."

"You talked to Dad?" Ron's eyes bugged out in surprise.

"First stop," Harry confirmed.

"Bloody hell, mate," Ron shook his head. "You *have* got it bad."

Harry herded the girls out of the house just after dinner that night with the promise of a ride in his new car, an Invicta SI, and a stop for an ice cream. Meg looked at him suspiciously, but followed, helping to keep her two younger sisters in line, and reasonably quiet.

When they got into the car, the two younger girls in the back seat and Meg sitting next to him, they went on a bit of a joy-ride through London, zipping down Whitehall, past the tourists in Trafalgar Square, and on down over Westminster Bridge to the South Bank. Harry drove around for a bit, then spied a Mr Whippy van on a corner near a park and pulled into a parking spot nearby.

He bought them all cones, then they walked through the park, looking for a bench.

"Uncle Harry, what's going on?" Meg asked.

"Well, I wanted to talk to the three of you, privately."

"What about?" Mary asked. She was on the cusp of adulthood, still with her childish innocence, but able to sense undertones and respond to them. Right now, something was telling her that Harry was nervous, and that was unfamiliar territory for her.

"Well, I know you miss your Dad..." he started. "It's been five years now, and, well, your Dad was a good friend of mine. We were roommates at Hogwarts..."

Meg slipped her hand into his as they walked along. "Were you angry with him?" she asked quietly.

"Angry with your Dad?" Harry glanced down at her, surprised. "No, why?"

"Because he stole Mum from you." Meg said.

Harry took a breath. How did you tell a teenage girl that it didn't quite happen that way...? You didn't, he realized.

"Um... how did you know..."

"Oh, come on, Uncle Harry!" Meg laughed. "You're Harry Potter. Every detail of your life at Hogwarts is documented. Everyone at school knows that you dated our mum in school."

"Yeah," Maddy put in, "Denny Samuels says..."

"Who is Denny Samuels?" Harry was quickly beginning to understand that he was losing control of the conversation.

"A kid at school," Maddy explained, looking at him like any idiot would know that.

"His mom's name is Parvati. Denny says she was in your year."

Harry sighed. Parvati Patil. Would he never escape it?

"Well, Denny says that you and Mum were tight."

"Tight?" Harry inquired.

"You know... dating."

"Ah."

"And then there is the picture," said Maddy, skipping along ahead of them.

"Picture? What picture?" Harry was floored.

"In the common room, on the stairway up to the girls' dorm," said Meg. "You know."

"No... I... I've never been up that staircase," he evaded.

Meg rolled her eyes and snorted. "Sure, Uncle Harry, whatever you say."

"What picture?"

"There is a picture with you in your Quidditch uniform," Meg said. "Mum and you are locking lips like there is no tomorrow. It must have been right after a game, because you're all rumpled and dirty."

Suddenly, he remembered. The final game for the House Cup in sixth year. He'd told her a week later that he couldn't endanger her anymore. But that night...

They had won, of course, and Ginny had attacked him full on as the team left the field. He'd remembered the feel of her arms around him as she leapt into his arms, and her legs wrapping around his waist, and then the feel of her wind-cooled lips against his...

And later, in the third floor corridor broom closet, Ginny laid back on a pile of discarded pillows and rugs, and the bliss they'd found... he'd found in her arms.

"Uncle Harry?" Meg's voice intruded on his memories. "Were you angry with our Dad for that?"

Harry turned to her. "No, Meg, I wasn't angry with your Dad. I lost your mum because I was an idiot. Your Dad was there for her, and treated her as she deserved to be treated. I could never be angry with either of them for that."

"But you never got married to anyone else," Meg said intuitively.

"I couldn't," he shrugged. "No one ever measured up to her."

They walked a bit further before Meg stopped, turning to him.

"This isn't about our Dad," she stated.

"No, Meg, it isn't. Not really."

"Then what is it about?"

Harry looked at each of them, then sighed. "I was a complete idiot, years ago. I'd like to think that if I hadn't been, you three would be mine. But that dismisses all of the wonderful qualities you got from your Dad, and I never want to do that."

"How would you feel... I mean, I don't want you to think that I would ever believe I could replace him, but... I..."

"Uncle Harry?" Mary looked up at him, "Are you...?"

"Meg, Mary, Maddy, I want to ask your mother to marry me, but I want to be sure you're okay with it before I do."

For a moment, none of them spoke, then Harry was shocked as all three girls launched themselves at him. He was immediately knocked over, his forgotten ice cream cone flying as the girls climbed over him, hugging and squealing.

"Really, truly?" Maddy cried. "You really want to be our Dad? Really?"

"Oh, Uncle Harry!" Meg cried, tears running down her cheeks. "We never thought..."

"I guess you're okay with it, then?" he laughed as he sat up with them still draped all over him.

"Okay? *Okay?*" Mary squealed. "Are you kidding? Okay with it? Of *course* we're okay with it!"

As Harry tried to get up with both Mary and Maddy still on top of him, Meg stood, brushed herself off and headed back towards the car.

"Meg?"

"Well?" she didn't turn as she shouted out, "What are you waiting for? You've got a proposal to make, and we've got a wedding to plan!"

Harry winced, then called back, "She hasn't said yes, yet, Meg!"

Meg snorted, "Like that is going to be an issue!"

Harry drove back to the house quickly. Ordering the girls to stay silent, they headed inside to find Ginny.

He found her in the kitchen with her mother.

"Where have you been?" she asked, "I was worried when you and the girls disappeared."

"Molly, would you mind if I stole your daughter away for a while?"

Molly, who was wiping dishes and putting them away, smiled happily. "Not at all, Harry, love. The girls are going to help me, aren't you?"

Her three granddaughters, much to their mother's surprise, immediately grabbed dish towels and began to help, grinning.

"Come with me," Harry whispered into her ear from behind her as he wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close.

"Harry, I..."

At that moment, with his arms around her, the room around them dissolved and a new one took its place. Ginny realized he had apparated them, but it took her a moment to realize to where.

The Gryffindor common room. It was empty, thank goodness.

“Harry?”

“This is where it all began,” he said. “Actually, it began at Kings Cross station. You were ten, and I was all but completely lost. Your mum helped me, and Ron and I sat together on the train. That was the start of a friendship that I wouldn’t trade for anything. But most importantly, it was the first time I ever saw you.

“It was almost a year before I saw you again, at the Burrow. You were eleven. It was the morning of my twelfth birthday.

“That year, you came with us, here. Then, every year, you were there, always more beautiful than the year before. It was my sixth year when I finally realized that you were... you. And then it seemed I’d always known. I wanted you, not for a sister, or just a friend, but for me to love.

“That was possibly the best and worst year of my life. No. The worst was the year you married Dean.”

“You stood with my family...” she said.

“While my last hope left me,” he agreed. “But I couldn’t ruin that day for you. I wanted you to have happy memories of it.”

“I do... but sad ones, too,” she said quietly.

“Do you know what one of my happiest memories is, Ginny?”

“No. What?” she smiled up at him.

He drank in the sight of her for a moment before turning and heading for the girls staircase. It took a minute to find it, but he did. Taking down the framed photo, he came back to her, handing it to her.

"The girls told me it was there. I have no idea who put it up there, but..."

"I did," she whispered.

"You did?"

"In my seventh year. I wanted..." she cried, tears running down her face. "I didn't want it to be just my memory, forgotten by everyone else. I wanted someone to remember, someday, that Harry Potter had loved me once."

Harry pulled her close. "When the girls told me it was there, I was shocked. I couldn't remember the picture being taken, but I remembered the circumstances when they described it to me. I've carried the memory of that game, and you, and that night, with me for years. It's what got me through so many really, really hard times. So far, it's been the highlight of my life."

"Oh, Harry!" Her tears ran freely as she gripped the photo in both hands.

"I'm hoping, though, to add some new ones to it." He took a deep breath, then put his hand in his pocket. "If you don't like this, then you can choose something you like better, but this was my mother's..."

He looked into her wide chocolate-brown eyes as he spoke, holding out the ring. "Ginny, would you please marry me?"

Ginny began to sob. Harry wasn't quite sure what to make of it, but he was pretty certain that this wasn't a positive reaction.

"Oh, Gin', I'm sorry. Please don't cry, I know... I've rushed it, and..."

"Rushed it?" she sobbed. "Harry Potter, you idiot! Eighteen years is *not* rushing it!"

Harry looked at her, stunned, as she threw her arms around him, kissing him joyfully.

“And for your information, Mr Potter, I would be honored to wear your mother's ring. Oh, Harry! It matches your eyes!”

When they arrived back in the kitchen of Potter Manor, it was to find the entire Weasley clan congregated there. They all seemed anxious, and the looks on their faces were expectant.

Harry and Ginny looked around at all her family, and their families, staring at them, silly, curious grins from all of them.

“What?” Ginny said. “Never seen an engaged couple before?”

Chapter Thirteen: Things are not always as they seem

Maura was chatting with Bill and Janie at the kitchen table when the telephone rang early the next afternoon. They were all startled by it, because while Harry's cel phone seemed to be in constant use, the house phone seldom rang.

"Maura?" Molly called from the hall. "Phone for you, love."

Maura had given the number at Harry's house to three people: the super at her building, Stephen Lewis, and Naomi Baxter.

"Who is it, Molly?" she asked as she stepped into the hall.

"I'm sorry, love, I didn't get a name. It's a woman, though."

"Thanks," Maura smiled and took the phone from her, turning with her back towards the hallway as she spoke. "Maura Kennedy."

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Naomi's voice wasn't raised. Naomi seldom raised her voice. But it was very obvious that she was blazingly angry.

"Naomi, how nice to hear from you," Maura said dryly.

"Maura, you've made yourself into a laughingstock. And subsequently, you've made *me* look like a laughingstock, because I bloody hired you when no one else would."

"Naomi..."

"Look, you've tossed it, all of it, away. Your word, your credibility, it's all shot now. And for what, a payoff from that rag?"

"It wasn't about the money, Naomi."

"Then what the hell was it about, Maura? How do you throw a career away as you've done? For what reason?"

"For the truth, Naomi. The truth. That is the business that we're supposed to be in, right?"

"Truth? Have they bloody brainwashed you?"

"Who?"

"That damned cult that's gotten its claws into you! The psychos that have you believing that Harry goddamned Potter is alive and well and living in SoHo!"

"Well, it's not Soho... but..." Maura looked up to see Harry looking out his den doorway at her. "But he is, Naomi. I'm looking at him as we speak."

"Maura, I'm begging you, get out of there, come here, I'll take you to the hospital... if they've drugged you..."

"Naomi, no one has drugged me, or brainwashed me," she smiled as she saw Harry grin. "I assure you, had you listened to me the day I came to you, you would have seen the proof for yourself. But, as it was, Stephen Lewis was the only one who cared to listen, so he ended up with the story."

"I assure you, Maura," Naomi's voice changed to steel. "If you don't write a retraction of everything you've said in that rag, the mainstream media is finished with you."

Maura was silent for a moment. She couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "Are you threatening me? Are you threatening to blackball me?"

"It's not a threat, Maura. At least, not one of my making. You've thrown your career away, and you have no one to blame but yourself for that. We're finished with you."

Maura took a deep breath, "So be it, Naomi. If that's what you feel you need to do, do your worst."

Naomi said nothing more, only the click on the other end told Maura that she had disconnected the call. Silently, she replaced the receiver in the cradle and sighed.

"Maura?" Harry still stood, watching her. "Everything okay?"

"No. No, it's not, Harry," she smiled sadly, holding back the tears. "I've been officially fired and told that I might as well not bother to apply elsewhere. My name has been destroyed by the mainstream press, and I won't work there ever again."

With that, she walked tiredly up the stairs and on to her workroom, where she stood aimlessly in the middle of the mess of letters and ringing phones and computer printouts, and began to cry.

She didn't know how long she stood there before she felt strong arms go around her, but when they did, she turned and buried her face in the chest of the man holding her.

"Maura, honey, it's okay..."

"Oh, Ron! They *fired* me! I worked so hard and..."

"Shhh... I know, I know. It'll be okay, though...I promise. Shhh..."

"I don't know, Ron. I'm beginning to think that nothing will ever be okay again," she sobbed into his shirt.

"Trust me," he said, as he brushed the hair away from her tear-wet face. "Trust me, it will."

Ron seemed confident, and she smiled, then looked to the doorway where Janie and Amelia were hovering, wanting to get back to work, but unsure if they were interrupting anything.

"Well, come on, then," she smiled at them over her shoulder and through her tears. "It would appear that I've been fired from gainful employment, so I'm about to immerse myself completely in this, and I can't do it with those damned phones ringing."

Ron smiled and sighed with relief. She'd be okay. Maura would be just fine.

It seemed like Harry spent the next week on top of the world. Despite what was going on, he had finally gotten the woman he had loved since adolescence to agree to marry him, her three daughters as a

bonus, and the movement they had begun was gaining momentum by the minute.

Of course, now he was being called all sorts of names in the muggle press, everything from a neo-nazi to a cult guru, but for some reason, that only increased the number of inquiries they were getting. As had been said many times before, any publicity is good publicity.

He already had enough “alternative students” as they were being called to create a summer program at Hogwarts. The Order had met and agreed on a six-week intensive basic course to begin with, and any students showing any talent were to have their stay extended by an additional four weeks.

Minerva reported that the response at the school had been overwhelming. Senior students and staff were all helping to open up sections of the castle that had been closed for years to make room for the new students and instructors.

It had also been decided that, instead of integrating these new “students” into the general school population and existing houses, they would be brought into two new houses. Harry nearly cried when he heard the suggested names of the new houses.

Dumbledore and Granger.

The school had also experienced a flood of offers by senior witches and wizards to act as instructors to these new students. Harry was shocked by the response.

And Maura worked like a demon. She had turned out four new articles, much to Stephen Lewis' delight, and walked around looking exhausted. Harry thought she simply wasn't sleeping until one night she cornered him in his office to speak to him.

She wanted to discuss the ramifications of having been fired and blackballed in the mainstream press. He had failed to see the problem, but Maura seemed concerned about maintaining her apartment and car payments.

He had offered to make the payments for her, or to replace the income she was losing, which for some reason, had only served to make her so angry her short curls had crackled and snapped with the excess energy she was putting out.

Eventually, she had managed to ask him if she could continue to stay at Potter Manor for the foreseeable future, allowing her to sell both flat and car. He had readily agreed, wondering at her feeling the need to ask. It had been assumed by everyone there that Maura was there for good.

And after that, all was well, until the morning that the courier arrived, bringing with him a very official looking letter, addressed to Ms Maura Kennedy.

"The bloody military intelligence wants to question me, Harry!" she fumed. "What part of that do you not understand?"

"Maura, they just want to interview you..."

"...*you are encouraged to retain legal counsel to accompany you...*" she read from the paper in her hand. "Harry, that's not an invitation to bloody tea!"

"Maura, calm down," Ron said. "It's okay, Harry has about the best lawyers in Britian, and you're not going alone."

"Of course I am bloody going alone, Ron! Do you see 'Mr Ronald Weasley' written *anywhere* on these papers?"

"Maura," Harry said, leaning on his desk. "I promise you, you will not be attending this meeting alone. They may want to question you in private, but Ron and I will be there, and so will our counsel."

"Harry, this is the *military police*. The bloody MPs. These guys don't fool around."

"Neither do we, Maura," Ron said quietly. "They'll hurt you over my dead body."

Maura turned sad eyes on him. "There isn't much you can do from a military prison, Ron."

"You forget," he grinned as he touched her chin playfully. "I can apparate."

Maura smiled. She knew she was reacting unreasonably, but it wasn't every day that you received an official letter telling you the most powerful people in Britain, in the muggle world, at least, wanted you to justify and prove what you were saying. Or shut you up.

The day of the interview arrived without further surprises. Maura dressed carefully in her beige silk suit and Italian heels, and headed down for breakfast.

"I'll have eggs on in a minute, Maura," said Ginny from the stove as Maura entered. She wondered where Molly was.

"No eggs, thanks, Ginny. I wouldn't want to toss eggs all over the interviewers, now would I?"

Ginny laughed. "Perhaps not. How about tea and toast, then? That'll calm your tummy."

"Thanks," she accepted as she sat down at the table.

Harry and Ron were already seated. Harry was sipping at a mug of coffee as he read the paper, and Ron was busy with what looked like half a dozen eggs. Maura watched him in shock.

"Why is it that I have yet to see a fat witch or wizard?" she asked suddenly. "You all eat like it's going out of style."

Harry grinned as he looked over his paper. "It's a little known secret, actually. Spell casting takes a lot of energy. Energy is calories."

Maura's jaw dropped. "You're kidding me?"

"Nope," Ron said through a mouthful of egg. "Simple in/out equation, actually."

“But...” Maura thought for a moment. “So you people have the best-kept weight loss secret in the world, and no one has ever said anything?”

“Why should we?” Ron asked. “We all know it.”

Maura turned to her tea and toast as Ginny placed them before her, not noticing the identical grins of devilment that Harry and Ron were sharing over her head, wondering how long it would be before she figured out that they were having her on.

The doorbell rang, and Harry rose. “That’ll be Luna.”

“Luna?” Maura’s stomach lurched.

“Luna Davis,” Ron confirmed, finishing his breakfast and taking a sip of coffee as he pushed the plate away. “You know her as Luna...”

“Lovegood. Why, exactly, is Luna Lovegood here?”

“She’s our lawyer.”

Maura paled, “Please tell me you’re kidding?”

Ron glanced up at her from where he was reading the front page of the Sun. Stephen Lewis had had a complementary subscription delivered as soon as her articles were published. Ron turned to page three and smiled appreciatively.

“We’re not like we were in the books, remember Maura?”

Maura watched him, practically drooling over the... assets... of the page three girl, and snorted.

“Much,” she muttered.

At that moment, Harry entered the kitchen, a woman in a suit similar to Maura’s but fire-engine red, behind him. Maura looked up at her in near awe. She was, quite possibly, the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

“Maura, this is Luna...”

"Lovegood." Maura finished, smiling hesitantly. Luna seemed to read her expression instantly.

"Those damned books," she said dryly, without losing her smile. "I ought to sue that woman. But it was cheaper to just change my name. I go by Luna Davis now."

"Yes. Ron said."

"And I assure you," her grey-blue eyes snapped, "that I am *not* the vacant blonde I've been portrayed as."

"We always figured that that was because you mooned over Harry, Luna," Ron teased, still not looking up from the paper.

"Really? That doesn't explain why I wasted my time on you in sixth year then, does it, Weasley?" She said this in the same teasing tone, so Maura assumed that there was no anger behind it.

"You dated *Ron*?" Maura gasped.

"Yes, to my eternal shame," Luna turned her eyes on Maura. "Many of us fell into that particular... trap. What can I say? We were young, and hormonal."

Maura sputtered with laughter. She would never have expected dry wit from Luna Lovegood!

"Hey! I'm right here, you!" Ron said, finally looking up to them, tearing his eyes away from the rather well-endowed model in the paper.

"Relax, Ron, we're joking," Maura soothed him.

"Yes," Luna confirmed, but in a tone that made it seem almost a token remark. "Now, this is how we're going to deal with this..."

Half an hour later, they all four piled into Harry's car. Harry and Ron were both dressed in Saville Row-quality suits, and Maura would have felt a thrill of excitement in being out with the two of them, looking as they did, if it weren't for the fact of the situation.

Luna had confirmed Maura's feelings that this was unlikely to be a pleasant interview. Maura, however, had all of her ducks in the proverbial row. Every piece of research was neatly filed in her attache case, which was firmly in her lap.

"So, what was with the bottle-cap necklace?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Ron shouted with laughter, Harry's ears went red, and Luna turned long-suffering eyes on her.

"You had to bring that up in front of them, didn't you?"

"I... assumed..." Maura swallowed, fully aware that she had just put her foot in it, but not quite sure what 'it' was. "I assumed that it was another one of those things that weren't exactly accurate..."

"No. Although the author of those books certainly blew it all out of proportion," Luna sighed. "I wore a *single* bottle cap on a chain around my neck, under my clothes, for a short while in second year."

"Tell her why, Luna," Ron was laughing uncontrollably.

"Ron, shut up," Harry growled at him.

"Oh, not a chance, mate. This is just too, too good!"

Maura, uncertain of why this was getting the response that it was, turned back to Luna.

"I'm sorry?" she offered hesitantly.

"You couldn't have known," Luna dismissed, then continued. "When my father took me to Diagon Alley in August before my second year to get my school books, we stopped at a cafe for lunch. At the next table were Harry and Ron and the twins. Molly had apparently felt comfortable letting them out on their own without their leashes."

This last was thrown at Ron. He giggled harder.

"I had... we were all very affected with the thought of going to school with Harry Potter. We'd all grown up with stories of him. After my first year, well, we were all silly little girls, and I had a crush on him.

"When the four of them left their table, I took the bottle cap from Harry's drink, and later, I put it on a chain. I told my dorm mates when I got to school that year. Big mistake. It was all over the school in days that I wore a bottle cap necklace."

"Ah," Maura said. Ron was giggling hysterically, Harry's ears were the color of Luna's suit, and Luna was shaking her head.

"As you can see, I got over it enough to get myself through law school, and even managed to date the Weasel for a short while."

"Date? Was that what that was?" Ron muttered good-naturedly.

"Amazing how hard it is to tell sometimes, isn't it?" cracked Luna dryly.

Maura met Harry's eyes in the rearview mirror. Although his ears were still red with embarrassment, she could see the laughter there.

Half an hour later, the four were escorted to a desk where they were given security passes by a uniformed cadet. When this was done, they were escorted further into the huge concrete building by another uniformed man.

"If you'll wait here, the major will be with you in a moment," were the only words he said as he showed them into a small room with a long table with eight chairs grouped around it.

The walls were blank, the uncarpeted floor cold... the entire room was impersonal and grey. Maura felt mildly depressed.

Two minutes later, the door opened to admit two officers and two guards. Harry was the first to react, his eyebrows moving up. Ron remained expressionless, but Maura could tell he was having difficulty maintaining this. Luna gave a small smile, her lawyer-face firmly in place.

Maura turned, and met deep blue eyes.

"Well, hello," the man smiled down at her. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Major Creavey!" Maura smiled, recognizing the man. They had run into each other repeatedly during her time as a correspondent. Although she'd never interviewed him directly, those who worked in war zones inevitably became part of a community that interacted and got to know each other. Major Creavey and Maura had sat near each other in many an embassy bar, and ex-patriot dining room.

"Maura Kennedy. What on earth have you been up to now?"

Maura grinned irreverently, "Getting to the truth, Major. Mainstreamers don't like to hear that over their Wheaties, but hey, someone's got to do it, right?"

He shook his head at her, still smiling, then indicated to one of the guards, who disappeared through the door.

He turned to the others. "I do believe that we have more visitors than we invited."

Harry nodded, "We're friends. Concerned friends."

"I know who you are, and don't pretend I don't, Harry Potter." Major Creavey grinned suddenly, holding his hand out to shake. "How are you, Harry? Ron? It's been a lot of years."

Harry smiled, Ron relaxed, they both shook his hand.

"Yes, it has, Colin. Too many."

"You know each other?" Maura asked, stunned. "Wait a minute... Colin? Colin *Creavey*?"

Colin smiled at her. "It's not difficult to dispose of first names in the military. No one really asks."

"You're... you're not...?"

"Yes, I am," he sat down. "But that discussion is for another time. This is Lieutenant Howell."

They greeted the other officer, and Harry's eyes seemed to ask a question. Colin nodded, almost imperceptibly, and Harry relaxed.

"So, we're here to discuss these articles of yours, Maura. You're causing quite a stir."

"It's a stir that needs to be caused, Major."

"Yes, we agree."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

"You're surprised at that?" he asked.

"Quite," Harry said.

"Well, the British military has known for some time that what we are dealing with is... more... than we originally thought, The name Philip Mahood came up in a few meetings. I recognized it... damned history of magic classes."

"So, why are we here, then?" Luna asked. "If you agree with us that this must be done, why interfere?"

"Oh, we're not interfering, Luna." Colin turned to her. "We have no intention at all of interfering. We would, however, like to share the information you have... perhaps add a bit of our own... and make an offer."

"An offer?" Ron asked suspiciously.

"Relax, Ron. We understand that you've decided to extend Hogwarts education to more than just the magical community. Correct?"

"For self-defense, yes." Harry confirmed.

"Well, we'd like to offer some basic military tactical and observation training to that."

“What on earth for?” Maura asked.

“Because,” Colin said, “having a population trained to observe the world around them will increase the information and quality of information we are getting. Having trained people out there on the streets would be invaluable right now. Not to mention, observant people tend to get into fewer situations that can turn nasty, simply by being aware of things before they go too far.

“I don't need to tell you that our military is grossly underfunded for the kind of conflict that we're facing, Those who make the decisions on funding are in large part unaware of what we're about to deal with. To increase the manpower without having to fund it... I can't tell you how much of a benefit that would be.

“Prince William has given us...”

“Prince William?”

“The ruling monarch has always been our commander in chief, if only in an honorary capacity. With the death of the Prime Minister and the majority of the House of Lords, his role became much more. He's willing to listen to us. He has seen more... well, he's not completely doubting of your work, either, Maura.”

Colin gave them a moment to digest this as the guard who had left earlier returned with coffee and cool drinks on a tray. He then proceeded to offer it around. Maura took a coffee, more to have something to occupy herself with than anything else.

“What we would like to propose,” Colin continued, “is in addition to the supplementary classes you are going to be offering, you allow us to send some instructors of our own. We'd like to add to your classes two more. One on military intelligence tactics and observation, and one on basic hand to hand combat.”

“Colin, hand to hand combat training is useless against a wizard,” Ron commented.

“In most cases, I agree, Ron. However, the self confidence that comes from it is invaluable. It also teaches you to think under pressure, and that could just save some lives.”

The four thought for a moment, and Harry was the first to speak. “Your offer has merit, Colin. But I don't have the authority...”

Colin snorted. “Come off it, Harry. I was there, remember? You may not be Minister of Magic, but you're like a son to Arthur Weasley, and I know damned well what is planned for you when he retires next year. Minerva McGonagall would happily hand over the running of Hogwarts to you tomorrow and be thrilled to go back to teaching. You have more influence than any other wizard alive. Use it.”

Harry nodded once, “Very well. I will have to speak to several people... why don't you plan on coming to my home tomorrow evening? It will give me a chance to talk to the people I need to, and we can discuss it further then.”

Colin nodded, then turned to Maura.

“Now, I'm supposed to tell you to cool it, to stop writing things that may incite more violence, but I think I'd probably be wasting my breath.”

“Major, you know me too well.”

“Better than you think, Miss Kennedy. You're a terrier, Maura. You never do give up and go home.”

“Darned right.”

“So I'll just say that I would appreciate it if you would share any information that comes your way with us first, so that we can act before they do, agreed?”

“Agreed,” she nodded.

He took up his portfolio and nodded to the group, “I won't keep you any longer, but I will see you tomorrow.”

And my wonderful, wonderful reviewers – you guys keep me writing, so keep them coming (my ego can use all the stroking it can get!)

azntgr01: Yes – I thought so!

Saerry Snape: You didn't think I could go the entire story without some good fluff, did you?

*James Milamber: How do you do it? I hit a block, I feel like I've been written completely out, and you review a chapter, and I'm off again! I'm glad you're finding my rather **unique** sense of humor pleasing... I've been accused of being too caustic at times... ah well, to each their own, right? Again, thanks so much for your encouragement, you've no idea of how much it has meant to me!*

Pirate grEe: Yes... it is H/G. I thought so in the beginning, then I wondered, then I realized, it had to be. Watch out for more featuring Maura... I'm already considering a sequel...

GiGiFanFic: Ah, yes... that biological clock! We'll see, shall we? As for the magic in the world... I have a secret: it's there, you just need to know where to look. And we can certainly use all of it we can find.

Larna Mandrea: Thanks! You know, the picture thing just kind of happened... it wasn't planned, it just kind of popped out, and it was like I could see the photo in my head. It really summed up to me the relationship they had (in my mind) when they were together in school. Sometimes, when I'm writing, something will just happen like that, unplanned, but fits so well!

Shotgunn: Yes, I've been to London. I can't say that it's my FAVORITE British city (I think that honor goes to York, I loved it there). My husband is from Liverpool, and we love visiting. And yes, it does rain quite a lot, doesn't it (grin)? I know you're not supposed to be able to apparate into Hogwarts, but Harry is special ;-} Besides, I had to get them there for the picture scene, call it artistic license!

Merlindamage: Thanks, I wasn't quite sure how the pure fluff was going to go over, but... hey, we can all use the warm fuzzies sometimes, right? And I think that Ron is less of a git than he's made

out to be sometimes, he's just SUPER protective of his family. Use what you like, with blessings (and thanks for the compliment), I play well with others!

CQ

Chapter Fourteen: Secrets

They returned to the house in near silence. Maura stared moodily out the window, while Luna shuffled papers beside her.

"Harry, are your wards up to date?" she asked as she read.

"Luna, relax. There's no danger."

"You've just invited armed military personnel into the headquarters of the Order, Harry. Forgive me for being concerned," Luna commented dryly.

"Luna, their weapons will be useless the minute they enter. Relax." Ron was leaning his head back against the headrest. Maura watched as Luna glared at him.

"Do you want me to be there tomorrow night?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?" Harry sounded surprised.

"I know you prefer to keep the Order separate from your legal counsel."

"Luna, this goes beyond that. We'll need you there tomorrow."

"Six?" She inquired.

"Better make it five," he said. "I want plenty of time to discuss this before they show up. Can you look into contract law on..."

The conversation continued like this, with the odd comment from Ron, until they pulled into Harry's driveway. They were met by both Molly and Ginny at the door.

"Well?"

"Molly, we're going to have some guests tomorrow evening." Harry said.

"And Maura?"

"I'm fine, Molly. It was... a token warning. But I don't expect them to enforce it. Apparently, you people are everywhere."

Molly looked curiously at Harry, then Ron.

"The officer who questioned Maura turned out to be Colin Creavey," Ron said.

Ginny gasped, "You're kidding?"

"Not even a little bit."

Luna left shortly thereafter, and Maura retreated to the kitchen for a desperately needed cup of tea. It was nearly noon, and her stomach was doing back flips.

"I'll have lunch on in a minute, love," Molly bustled through. "You must be starved."

"Actually, Molly, I could kill a cup of tea."

"I just brewed a pot," Molly said. "Help yourself."

Ron came in just as she was pouring out and she looked up at him, indicating the pot. "Tea?"

"Love some," he said, sitting down at the table. "Well, that was a... surprising morning."

"Gee, how so?" she teased, adding the milk and two teaspoons of sugar she knew he liked and placing the cup in front of him.

Ron laughed. "So, how do you know Colin?"

"I'm a foreign correspondent who works in war zones, he's a military tactician. How do you think?"

"Known him long?"

"About four years, I guess. I can't remember when I first met him, and that's how long I've been doing this."

"Know him... well?" Ron stared into his cup, absently stirring his tea.

"As well as can be expected," she retorted stiffly. She didn't like where this was going.

"Oh? How well would that be?"

"Ron?" Maura watched him closely, "I didn't even know his first name. Does that tell you anything?"

Ron sighed. "Sorry, Maura, it's just..."

"Colin Creavey and I have met a handful of times, always in relation to our work. I've never been in his company in any private, personal way."

"Ah," Ron blushed.

"I don't believe it."

"What?"

"Your can blush."

"I am *not* blushing," he denied.

"Oh, really? Are you overly warm, then?"

"No... I... I didn't blush!"

"You did."

"You have got to be the most annoying woman! Do you *always* have to have the last word?"

"Now, now, children," Molly called from the pantry. "Stop bickering!"

"We're not bickering!" Ron called back.

"No. We aren't." confirmed Maura as Molly came into the kitchen. She picked up her tea and headed for the door. "*You* are, Ron."

“See?” she heard him yell. “The bloody *last word* again! See?”

“Whatever, Ron!” she called back over her shoulder, heading up the stairs to her work room. She had a lot of work to do by tomorrow evening.

The Order of the Phoenix met, en masse, at six o'clock the next evening. Harry had spoken to both Minerva and Arthur privately that day, and the meeting was more to share with the group what would be happening than to get input.

It was agreed that those coming didn't need to know the identities of the entire group, so many left before seven. Those who stayed were mainly those who had been revealed as members during the last war: Minerva, Harry, Ron, Molly and Arthur and their children, and Severus Snape. Maura and Luna's attendance was assumed.

By the time their guests arrived, the group was well versed in how they wanted this to play out. They recognized the benefits of an alliance with the muggle military, but knew too that the price might be too high.

When Colin Creavey arrived, he was accompanied only by Lieutenant Howell. He greeted Minerva and Ginny fondly, and offered a handshake to Snape, whose sneer was badly hidden.

“Still haven't forgiven me, huh?” Colin smiled at the older man, ruefully.

“Are you still as disrespectful as you were at fifteen, Mr Creavey?”

“I joined the military, professor. What do you think?” Colin grinned. “You know, it really wasn't that bad a picture.”

“Yes. If I'd been clothed at the time, it would have been quite lovely,” Snape said sarcastically, with his trademark sneer.

“Oh, you were clothed, professor,” Colin grinned slyly.

"I do not consider my nightclothes to be... suitable attire for a photo session, Mr Creavey."

"Oh... was it the fact it was your nightclothes? I always thought it was the purple bunnies that did it."

Snape looked like he was about to explode. The others stared, shocked speechless. Colin had gotten a picture of Snape in purple bunny pajamas?

"That I *have* to see," Ron stared at Colin in awe. "And here we always thought of you as the geeky brown noser."

Colin wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Not on your life, mate. You'd be surprised at how much fun a bloke with a camera and an uncle who is a fashion photographer can have in a school full of girls."

Ron's eyes almost popped. Harry cleared his throat and indicated for them to move into the War Room.

"Bloody hell," Maura heard Ron mutter as he followed Colin in. She tried to hide her grin, and failed dismally.

The following discussion lasted for over three hours, and centered mainly around the logistics of teaching military tactics at the school. Minerva was quite concerned about the reaction of the parents of her current students to the change in curriculum, and how it might be perceived.

"So offer it as an elective," Maura finally said shortly, frustrated that silly details were taking up so much of the discussion. "Like the DA was..."

They all stared at her. Colin's eyes assessed her coolly.

"You know... from the books?" she flushed. "What?"

"Nothing," Harry said. "And an excellent suggestion. Minerva, you could send each student's family a notice that electives will be offered for summer study and into next year. People will talk either way, but

this will give it a totally different feel than suddenly insisting every student take such training.”

“But will it be required curriculum for the... alternative students?” Minerva asked.

“Absolutely. They're coming to learn how to defend themselves and their families. This is part of it.”

“I would suggest,” said Colin, “that we have a modified curriculum for the younger students. I'm not sure the smaller ones would be able to handle the physical requirements of the full training.”

“That would, of course, be entirely up to you, Mr Creavey, and your best judgment.” said Minerva. “So long as it is not perceived as harmful to the students in any way.”

Colin nodded.

“Which brings us to the crux of it,” Severus sat forward as he spoke. “What about your instructors?”

“What about them?”

“Are they... what will their qualifications be?”

“Army drill instructors. The best there are, Professor.”

“That's not quite what I meant, Mr Creavey.”

“Then please, explain.”

“We have a duty to keep Hogwarts... secure... from the outside world. I would like to know how you would suggest having muggle instructors there without revealing to them the location of the school.”

“You certainly don't mean to suggest, Professor, that I would endanger the security of Hogwarts by revealing it to the muggle public?”

“I mean, Mr Creavey, that not just anyone can even see the buildings.”

"Ah, well, none of us attending ever had any problems."

"Only because the wards recognized your magic," explained Bill.

"Then we won't have any problem."

"We won't?" Snape asked.

"No, professor, we won't. All of those who have been selected to be exposed to Hogwarts are wizards or witches."

Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Colin?"

"You didn't think I was the only wizard in the military, did you?"

"Of course not, but..."

"Relax, all of you. I have fourteen instructors already lined up. Two for each year teaching one of the two subjects that we have discussed. All attended either Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, or Durmstrang. Well, except for one who was home educated. They are all exception in their fields, and are all already fully aware of Hogwarts' existence."

Colin undid the sleeve of his shirt and rolled it up. There was a dark tattoo on his left forearm.

"This is something we do," he stated, showing the tattoo around the table. It was of a rose wrapped around a baton... a wand, Maura realized. Underneath, there was a small lion's head and a scripted 'H'. "This tells anyone who knows what it means that I am an English wizard, the rose and the wand, and I attended Hogwarts, and was a member of Gryffindor House. Howell?"

Lieutenant Howell proceeded to roll up his own shirtsleeve, showing a fleur des lis and a wand, with a scripted B with wings.

"Beauxbatons?" Harry asked. Howell nodded. "So you're able to identify other witches and wizards without saying a word?"

"Yes."

"And what if others ask you what it means?" Maura asked.

"It's amazing what can be explained away by a three day bender," Colin grinned.

"So," Snape cut in, "You have appropriate personnel, then?"

"Yes," Colin confirmed, rebuttoning his sleeve.

"And are they trustworthy?"

Colin's eyes snapped up to his old Potion's professor. As a member of Gryffindor House, he'd also been on the receiving end of Snape's detentions more than once. He respected the man as an adult, but there was a lot of angst left over from the adolescent that Colin had been.

"As trustworthy as Dumbledore considered you, Professor."

"Very well," Minerva interjected, sensing a situation about to degenerate. "The accommodations for the additional students and staff is ready. I see no reason why we shouldn't proceed."

"Thank you, professor," Colin said. "I appreciate that."

"You will be one of the new staff, Mr Creavey?"

"I had hoped to take the senior students tactical instruction."

Minerva nodded, "I will require a list of your instructors names and outlines of the curriculum you intend to follow for each class."

Colin shuffled through his papers and handed a folder over.

"Thank you, Mr Creavey," Minerva placed the folder with her other materials. "you can let me know when to expect you?"

"By the end of next week, if you can have the students ready by then."

Maura looked around the table. The faces of the people there showed varying degrees of concern. Arthur and Bill seemed to be most concerned, but all that told Maura was that they were the least skilled at hiding their true feelings.

Harry's face showed nothing. He sat with one ankle resting on the opposite knee, playing absently with a pencil on the table.

Ron stared blankly at the papers in front of him. Maura could tell that he was listening, hearing every nuance in every person's voice. She had learned in her time here that Ron had amazing auditory skills. He could hear things that others couldn't. He used that skill a lot, seeming to be Harry's silent back up or sidekick, when in fact, he often told Harry later about what he'd picked up from the way in which people said things, or the tone in their voice when they spoke. He was half of the team, and nothing less.

They finished off the meeting, and Harry invited Colin and Howell into his study for a drink as the others left. Maura and Ginny went into the kitchen, the others dispersed, and Ron followed Harry and the two soldiers into the den.

Once the door was closed, Ron took his usual place in the chair in the far corner, and Harry cast a quick privacy charm while pouring out firewhiskey for each of them.

Colin observed him silently as he handed them around, and waited until they were all seated before he spoke.

"How did you find her, Harry?"

Harry looked down into the glass he held and smiled sadly. "Don't worry, Colin. It had nothing to do with your ability as a secret-keeper."

Chapter Fifteen: Secrets Revealed

The next morning dawned bright and sunny. Maura knew, because she was awake to see it. She'd been up for ages, going over her notes, and even churning out another article, which she emailed to Stephen Lewis at six-thirty.

At seven, she made her way to the kitchen, hoping that Molly was up and had coffee ready, but ready to make it herself if she wasn't. She found not only Molly there, but Arthur and Ginny, as well.

"Good morning, Maura," greeted Molly.

"Morning, Molly. Ginny, Arthur."

"You're up early," Ginny commented.

"You have no idea," Maura laughed. "I think I need a break. I've been up working since four."

"Good," said Ginny. "You can come with the girls and I, then."

"And where are you and the girls going?" Maura sipped at the coffee that Molly had placed in front of her.

"Diagon Alley. They all need new dress robes... I thought I'd take them shopping this morning before I take them back to school tonight."

"Sounds like fun," Maura said with a smile. "If you don't mind my tagging along?"

"Not at all," Ginny said. "I'd be glad of the company. The girls want to look at wedding robes." She blushed.

"Ah," Maura nodded. "So some adult opinion might be in order, then?"

"Exactly," Ginny said with relief.

It wasn't yet nine when they flocked to the Leaky Cauldron. Maura arrived, coughing, completely understanding Harry's dislike of this

form of travel, and wishing she knew how to apparate. Ginny and the girls had arrived spotless, of course. Maura was not impressed.

They spent the morning shopping for new dress robes for the girls. Mary had tried on one set, declared that it would do, and that she wasn't trying on another thing, and promptly parked herself in a chair with a Quidditch book. Meg and Maddy were much more fun. Maddy ended up in a set of deep blue robes that made her hair and skin glow. Maura noticed tears in Ginny's eyes when she saw her baby in dress robes.

Meg tried on several robes before exiting the change room in a set of emerald green that made both Maura and Ginny gasp.

Under the baggy sweatshirts and muggle jeans that Meg normally wore, or her equally baggy school uniform, Meg had a figure to die for. She was as slim as her mother, but there the similarity ended. She was taller than Ginny, and had curves where Ginny hadn't acquired them until after three pregnancies.

Maura glanced at Ginny, "Well, I think we've found the robes for Meg."

"Oh, I think so," Ginny agreed quickly. "Honey, you're beautiful."

Meg blushed, then turned to look at herself in the mirror. She plucked absently at the neckline of the dress, and looked worried.

"Mum, you don't think it's too... well..."

"Meg, it's perfectly beautiful. Those robes could have been made for you."

"I like it, a lot," Meg whispered.

"We'll take them. All three." Ginny told the sales witch.

"Mum, they're awfully expensive," Meg said quietly. Maura could see the pending disappointment in the girls eyes. She'd obviously been told often that money was tight.

"I don't care," said Ginny, causing her daughter's eyes to snap up to hers in surprise. "They're yours."

Meg, biting her lip with worry, still couldn't help looking pleased. "Thanks, mum."

"Not a problem, honey. I can remember..." Ginny trailed off, taking a breath and busying herself with her purse. Maura had a sudden image of Ginny dressed in pink robes that did absolutely nothing for her.

"Remember what, Mum?" Maddy asked.

"I can remember not getting pretty things because money was tight. Once in a while, you just have to say, 'too bad'."

Meg smiled happily.

Maura hadn't really considered before what life was like for Ginny as a single mum. It couldn't be easy to raise three girls, send them to an exclusive school, and provide the necessities for them on a single salary.

But now, she has Harry, Maura thought.

"Ginny, I'm very happy for you." She said suddenly, not even thinking about it.

Ginny looked at her and blushed. It wasn't easy for a redhead to hide their feelings. "I wondered."

Maura looked confused for a moment, then flushed slightly herself. "Ah... well..."

"You know, you really threw him off balance at first."

"Well..."

"You *were* attracted to him, Maura. Admit it."

"Well, yes...but like I told you, Gin', it wasn't like any kind of attraction I've ever known. I can't explain it to you, it's just... I've never felt

anything like that before. I don't know what it is, but it's not that. I know that now."

"But you..."

"Look, Ginny, Harry is a very attractive man. It would be hard to look at him and not feel something. But it's just not... even when I was feeling it, and reacting to it, it wasn't comfortable, you know? I don't know why I feel this way about him, but it's nothing... permanent, or serious. It's a bit of chemistry with something else I don't recognize... but that is *all* it is. I thought it was something more, at first, but only because I didn't recognize it, and I thought... well, it isn't."

"So you're okay with this? Us? Me and him?"

"I am very okay with this," Maura smiled. "It's... it just feels like it's the way things are supposed to be."

"When you go back..." Ginny hesitated. "You will keep in touch with us, after?"

Maura paused. It was a good question, the kind that brought up other questions.

"Ginny, I don't know if I want to go back at all. I'm... I feel like I'm home here, for some reason."

"That's what I wanted to hear," her friend said softly. "There's more for you here, I think."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, you'll figure it out. Now, let's go and get some lunch and look at wedding robes!"

They had lunch at a cafe in Diagon Alley, then made their way to a shop that specialized in wedding robes. At the girls urging, Ginny parked herself in a change room, and allowed them to bring her robes to try on.

Maddy and Mary came up with some spectacularly horrible ones, but Meg and Maura were looking seriously. Maura explained to Meg what would look best on Ginny's small, slim figure, and why.

"What about these?" Meg pulled out a robe, looking at it on the hanger. "No, too plain."

"Wait a minute," Maura took it from her before she could put it back.

It was ivory silk, and deceptively simple. The square neckline would be snug, but the dress swept out into long flowing sleeves and skirt.

"Get her to try this," Maura nodded.

"Really?" Meg looked at the dress doubtfully.

"Really. You'll see."

Ten minutes later, they all stood, stunned, staring at Ginny. Even the sales witch was struck speechless.

"What?" Ginny wailed, looking frantically around for a mirror. "Is it that horrible?"

"Mum..." Meg began.

"You look like a princess," Maddy said quietly.

"Oh, Mama!" Mary said, "It's beautiful!"

The sales witch turned Ginny by the shoulders so she was looking in the direction of a mirror. Ginny's mouth hung open in shock.

"Holy Merlin!" she said. "That's not me!"

"Oh, but it is," Maura smiled, her eyes tearing up. "Oh, Ginny! You are beautiful."

"I'll take it," Ginny told the sales witch. "The length will have to be adjusted..."

"We can have it ready in two days."

Ginny nodded.

When she'd changed, and paid the sales witch, they began walking back to the Leaky Cauldron to floo home.

"The robes I wore for my wedding to Dean were... very different." she said quietly to Maura. The girls were several steps ahead of them, and she obviously didn't want them to hear.

"How so?" Maura asked.

"Oh, you know. Frills. Lace."

"Ah..."

"Mum insisted, and I didn't care."

"Oh, Ginny..." Maura could feel the tears in her own eyes.

"Maura, do you think I was wrong to accept Dean?"

"I think that you did what you felt you needed to do at the time. No one can second guess or question that, Ginny."

"But when we settle for less than we need, less than we are..."

"Look at what you got from it, Gin'," Maura indicated the three girls walking ahead of them. "Would you trade that?"

"No way," Ginny smiled.

"Darned right. So don't worry about it any..."

At that moment, a scream was heard ahead of them, and Maura and Ginny both rushed instinctively in front of the girls, pulling them down to the ground.

"Stay down!" Maura yelled as Meg shot to her feet, her wand out and ready. "For Merlin's sake, Meg, *stay down!*"

She dropped the bags she had been carrying, and instinctively pulled out the wand that Harry had given her just as there was a loud pop in front of her.

Ten feet away from them stood the most horrible thing that Maura thought she'd ever seen. Everything good in her life seemed to disappear, and she felt so very, very cold...

"Expecto Patronum!" she screamed, remembering all the good she'd found. Ginny and Harry laughing... Bill and Janie smiling into each other's eyes... the look on Arthur Weasley's face when he was surrounded by his children...

Ron.

A white light shimmered, and then coalesced into a solid form, an owl, that flew directly at the black robed figure. Watching, she saw the horrible thing hesitate, then scream as the white form flew into it, and through it. The black robes disintegrated in front of her. The owl returned, circled her once, then dissipated as Maura whirled around to face a second figure.

This one was no Dementor, and she reacted, again, instinctively.

"Expelliarmis!" After that, the curses flew... she dodged several, but a cutting curse caught her on the upper arm, and just as she turned to throw another, the figure disappeared with a pop. Maura looked around, panicked, but they were gone.

Ginny touched her shoulder, looking at the blood flowing there, and laid her hand on Maura more firmly.

"We need to get you back to the house," she said.

"You need to get the girls to safety. I'll find a floo somewhere..."

"Nonsense," Ginny said. "I can apparate us all, it'll just take some concentration."

Ginny hugged her girls to her, and firmly took Maura's hand in hers, then closed her eyes. It took a moment, and they seemed to move

more slowly than Maura remembered it from travelling with Ron and Harry, but a few moments later, they were standing in the kitchen of Potter Manor.

Or rather, the girls were standing. Maura and Ginny collapsed on the floor.

Instantly, Molly was yelling for Harry and Ron... and the sound of footsteps came rushing in.

Ginny felt herself being lifted, and opened her eyes to see Harry holding her, his face worried, his eyes searching her for an injury.

"Take care of Maura, Harry. She's hurt."

"So are you!" Harry cried.

"No," Ginny shook her head. "I apparated us all out of there..."

"You *what*? Ginny, my God!"

"Had to, Harry... Death Eaters... but you should have seen Maura."

"What?"

"I didn't know she was a witch, Harry..." Ginny said weakly as she passed out in his arms.

Ron had lifted Maura up off the floor, and Molly was hurriedly collecting the first aid supplies as he laid her on the dining table.

"Mum?" he looked at her, worried.

"It's okay, Ron. She'll be fine. She's just lost a lot of blood..."

"Mum!"

"Ron... go call Bill and Charlie. Something has happened, and we need to be on full alert." Molly ordered.

Ron glanced down at Maura, nodded, and then hurried from the room.

Maura was floating. She didn't particularly like the feeling, but somehow she knew that she would like the alternative even less. She heard noises... screams and explosions. There were flashes of green light, and it was very, very dark.

And then she heard Molly's voice, calling her. Then Ron's.

"Ron?" she whispered.

"Maura, you're okay. Everything is going to be okay now."

"You keep telling me that..."

"This time, I swear it's true." Ron's voice was strangled.

"Dementors..."

"It's gone, Maura, it's gone."

"An owl... a beautiful white owl..." she muttered as she slowly fell back asleep.

The next time Maura woke, it was to silence. It was dark, and she thought she was alone. But then, she could hear something. Breathing.

But not her own breathing.

She turned her head and saw Ron, sitting in a chair next to her bed, his head in his hands.

"Ron?" she whispered.

His head snapped up, "Maura?"

"Can I have a drink?"

He helped her to sit up, then held a glass to her lips. She felt a tug in her shoulder, and turned to look down. White bandages were wrapped around her upper arm.

“What happened?”

“That's supposed to be my line,” he said. “You and Ginny and the girls went shopping. You came back like this.”

“Ginny? The girls? They're okay?”

“Yes. Ginny's passed out. She apparated you all back here.”

“Is that difficult?”

“It's bloody impossible. You can apparate with a second, sometimes a third if it's a child, but apparating five people... I don't know of that ever being done before. She's exhausted herself.”

“I told her to get the girls to safety... I'd find a floo, but the next thing I knew...”

“That's our Ginny,” he said with pride. “Apparently they wouldn't have gotten out of there if it hadn't been for you, Maura.”

“Ron... I don't know how I did it.”

“Ssh... you need to rest. You're going to be fine, but we'll talk in the morning. Everything will be clearer then.”

“Ron?”

“Yes?”

“Will you stay? I don't want to be alone.”

“Of course,” he smiled, remembering the first time he'd encountered a Dementor. He laid beside her on the bed, wrapping an arm around her. “Sleep. I'll watch over you.”

And Maura slept.

She woke the next morning to see a strange woman lifting the covers over her.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, Miss Kennedy. I'm medi-witch Ferguson. Mr Potter had me come to examine you."

"Why? I thought..."

"Molly did an excellent job patching you up. Mr Potter just wanted to be sure there was nothing else. Mr Potter and the others will be in in a moment."

"Like hell," Maura muttered. "They want to see me, they'll do it downstairs with me fully clothed and on my feet."

"If you prefer," the medi-witch smiled pleasantly. "There is no reason you shouldn't be up."

"Gee, thanks," Maura said, wincing as her arm protested being moved as she got out of bed.

"I'll let them know that you'll be down, shall I?"

"Please do. They've got some explaining to do."

She had pulled on her jeans, and decided to forego a bra and the pain she imagined it would cause her getting into one, and was just raising a tshirt to pull over her head as the door flew open.

"What the hell do you think... Oh..." Ron stopped dead at the sight before him: Maura, arms raised, bare-breasted, looking at him in shock. "Sorry... I..."

"Ronald Weasley, *get out!*"

Ron spun around, his back to her, but he didn't leave.

"You shouldn't be out of bed. There's no reason why..."

"There damned well is," she said, pulling the tshirt over her head. "If you think I'm going to lay in that bed like a damned invalid while you and Harry decide what to tell me, you, sir, are *sadly* mistaken!"

With that, she marched past him into the hall and down the stairs. It wasn't until she reached the bottom that she realized that she was barefoot.

"Too bad!" she muttered. "I need some answers. Now."

She found them grouped in Harry's den, even Ginny. Eyeing her quarry, she marched through the room and right up to Harry, who was standing in front of the fireplace, and poked him with her index finger in the chest, her other fist coming to rest on her hip. She was a vision of anger, and Harry's face showed his surprise. Ron had followed her meekly into the room.

Poking him again, she glared at him. "Now, explain."

"Umm...explain what, exactly?" Harry hedged.

Maura's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Harry, you have some secrets, and you'd better start talking before I decide to use one of my new-found talents on you."

"Um..."

"Just..." she marked each word with another poke to his chest, "...who... the... hell... am... I?"

Harry swallowed and sighed. The others in the room gasped.

"Because," she continued. "I am pretty damned sure that the person I *think* I am is as fictitious as... as those damned books!"

"You're Maura Kennedy," Harry said. "But as to who you used to be..."

Molly cried out, and Ginny gasped. Others in the room had similar reactions as Harry waved his hand over her and she began to shimmer in front of them.

She felt different. But oddly right. Where she had never really been comfortable in her own skin, she felt so now. She wanted to stretch...

as though she'd been asleep for a long, long time. As she moved, she noticed her hair, it was... it was growing, and the color was darkening.

Her facial muscles stretched, and then relaxed, and she took a deep breath as her tshirt became noticeably tighter. She looked down and her eyes rounded with shock.

Those were new.

"Oh, Merlin..." Ron's voice came from behind her to her left. "Harry, I don't think I ever really believed you, but now... my God..."

"I told you it was her, Ron," Harry said quietly.

"I didn't..." Ron stood, staring at her, tears in his eyes.

"Harry?" she turned back to him. "What's going on? What..."

"Up until seventeen years ago, you were known as Hermione Granger," he stated quietly. "After the final battle, you were... changed. Given a new life, new memories."

"Why?" she cried.

"If I give you that, you can't go back. If you want to, I can change it all right now, all of this. I can wipe your memories of this and you can go back to believing you're Maura Kennedy..."

"I want to know!" she screamed.

Harry nodded, then held his hands up, a foot from her head, but his palms towards her. His eyes closed.

Maura was hit with it all at once, and promptly staggered, trying to keep on her feet. She was grateful as she felt strong arms go around her. The memories washed over her... and she collapsed with the force of it.

The early years... as a child in Southampton. Her mother, Laura, and her father, David...

The day the letter came from Hogwarts. Her mother crying, not understanding. Her father raving about lunatics. Then Minerva McGonagall arriving and explaining Hermione's gift to them...

Her parent's subsequent joy for her, and support of her decision to go to Hogwarts, and to learn...

Meeting Harry and Ron. Their friendship. The joy she'd found with them... the friendless bookworm with two of the most popular boys in the school, caring about her. Her love for them... for Molly and Arthur... for Ginny...

The soft ginger fur of Crookshanks, her devoted cat, whom Ron had hated with a passion...

The incredible pressure of OWLs. Her joy when she experienced her first kiss... Ron grinning and blushing under the mistletoe...

The DA meetings, hours in the library... Quidditch games and Halloween Balls....

Then... seventh year. The attack on her home, being informed of the death of her beloved parents...

NEWTs, graduating, then training hard with Harry and Ron. Day and night. Falling into bed, exhausted, only to get up six hours later and repeat it all, every day, for an entire year...

Buying her cottage, working in the garden... the housewarming party she had had... the Weasleys and Harry... drinking lemonade in her flower garden...

The last night before the attacks that had begun the final battle. Hearing of Percy Weasley's sacrifice of his own life so that Voldemort wouldn't find his mother and sister...

And that final night. Dumbledore coming to her house... telling them of the attacks... returning to Hogwarts by the south road... and finding it blocked by hundreds of Death Eaters...

Curses flying, watching friends fall. Susan Bones and Ernie MacMillan, their lifeless eyes staring at the sky... Draco Malfoy throwing a curse at Harry... jumping in front of it... knowing...

And then, a feeling of lightness. Detachment... and then horror as she realized...

Turning to Dumbledore and trying to fight it... forcing her wand hand down... trying to fight... and when that failed, trying to turn the wand on herself...

Crying uncontrollably as she realized that she couldn't... she couldn't control it... Hearing the words chanting in her brain...

Avada...

No! Ron! Ron, please kill me! Ron! Please....please kill me before...

Avada kedavra.

Dumbledore's eyes. Sad, but still twinkling...

You are forgiven, Hermione Granger. I forgive you. If you remember nothing else, remember that.

The words in her head... how could he forgive her when she could never, ever forgive herself?

And then, the twinkle gone... Dumbledore falling... Ron turning from the prone body of Bellatrix Lestrange laying in front of him, the shock of his own use of an unforgivable mingling with the shock of what he saw before him...

Then Harry's voice...

"Hermione?"

"Oh, God... Merlin, Harry!" she sobbed. "I killed him! Oh, dear Merlin, I killed him..."

She felt other arms around her, sensed other bodies pressing close, but couldn't open her eyes. How could she look these people in the eye now?

"Why didn't you curse me?" she asked weakly. "Why give me a new life? Why didn't you kill me then?"

"Hermione... you were under the Imperious curse. You had no control over your own actions. Malfoy had you under the Imperious... he was controlling you."

"How do you know that for certain?"

"We have proof," Ron said quietly.

"Proof? What proof?"

"His confession. It was the only reason you weren't hunted down."

"Then why give me a new identity? New memories?"

"To let you live with yourself," Harry explained. "Mione, I knew that, regardless of the fact that it wasn't your fault, you wouldn't be able to live with yourself, knowing."

"Colin Creavey knew," she said. "Didn't he?"

She never had understood the look in his eyes... concern and... caring. On so short an acquaintance it had been strange. But it had never made her feel uncomfortable.

"He was the secret-keeper. He took you away and set everything up. So long as he kept your whereabouts a secret, none of us would ever know you."

"But you did. You found me."

"Yes. I was the one who changed you, so I could recognize my own magic. Once I was in the same room with you, there was no doubt. Finding out who you were living as was the hardest part, but not impossible."

She nodded.

“Maura...?”

“Hermione,” she whispered. “My name is Hermione.”

“Hermione,” Harry said. “You were under the Imperious curse. There was no way to fight it.”

“But...”

“Dumbledore knew, Mione...” Ron said. “He knew he would fall that night, and he went anyhow.”

“But not before he made a prophecy,” Harry sighed. “The prophecy that told us that you would be the key... it was Dumbledore who made it.”

Hermione began to sob, turning her face into Ron's chest.

“He forgave me. His voice in my head... as I said the curse... he forgave me. But how can I ever forgive myself?”

Chapter Sixteen: Hermione Granger

It took several weeks, but eventually Hermione got to the point where she wouldn't leave the room if it contained anyone other than Harry, Ron, Ginny or Molly. It was a few weeks later that she found she could meet the eyes of the person speaking to her. It took a while longer for her to stop crying herself to sleep every night.

She began to understand that what she had done, she had done unwillingly. Her failure to fight the power of the curse that Malfoy had cast was not *her* failure, but a regrettable event that she really had had no control over. The fact that it had been directed at Harry, and that she had jumped in front of it to keep it from hitting him, was something that everyone in the household took pains to point out to her. Harry especially.

Harry and Ginny, and Ron, were her strength during this time. Despite the floodgates of her memory having been opened, other memories continued to come back more slowly, and she seemed, for a few weeks anyhow, to walk around in a constant state of surprise about something.

It was especially difficult, at times, to be around Ron. Their relationship had always been... uncertain. She loved him with all her heart, but found herself teetering between the comfortable love and compatibility of very close friends and the uncomfortable, unsure, tongue-tied regard of someone who wants more, but doesn't really know if they want to risk what they already have. And she had no clue as to how Ron felt.

At least she had finally figured out her feelings for Harry.

With her new memories, she realized that her joy and comfort in his company, what she had mistaken for physical attraction, was something that had always been there. Their platonic, almost sibling-like love for each other was a great comfort to her during this extremely trying time, as it had been for Harry throughout their school years together. Hermione was grateful, and knew that, despite not being fully aware of who she was yet, she needed to discuss her earlier actions with Harry, or it might always be a source of discomfort between them.

So, being Hermione, she cornered him one night after dinner in his study.

"Harry? Can we talk?"

He looked up from his desk and the stack of paper he was reading and smiled. "Of course. Come on in."

She did, and when she closed the door and cast a privacy charm, he looked at her curiously. "Something up?"

"I need..." she took a deep breath. "I need to apologise to you."

"To me? What for?" He looked surprised.

"Harry, when I first arrived here..." she took another deep breath. This was turning out to be much more difficult than she thought. She felt her cheeks go pink. "When I first arrived here, after I got over the initial shock, I felt a connection to you, and I'm afraid that I might have misinterpreted..."

Harry smiled knowingly and leaned back in his chair, as though he knew what was coming, but also knew full well that she needed to say it, and he wouldn't be able to stop her.

"Harry, I said and did some things, based on what I thought was my..."

"Mione, it's okay."

"No, I need to explain."

"I understand," he said quietly.

"You do?"

"Of course. I was confused by my feelings for you, as well."

"You were?" she was shocked.

"Yes. I knew who you were, underneath. But... well, you'd had seventeen years to grow from an eighteen year old girl into a person I

didn't know. I was intrigued by that person. And, you didn't look like Hermione. It was... well, it was disconcerting."

"I..."

"Mione, Maura Kennedy was a very attractive woman. There was... well, I guess there was a sense of mystery about her. In essence, you *weren't* Hermione Granger anymore. Also, well... I never thought for a minute that Ginny would ever..."

Hermione smiled, "Okay, Harry."

He looked up at the tone of her voice. "What?"

"It's okay to hear your reasons for feeling attracted to... me... Maura...whatever," she grinned, "But I don't know if my rather fragile ego can take being told that you wouldn't have even considered looking twice if you thought you'd had a snowball's chance in hell with Ginny."

"Mione..."

"Harry, I recognize the feelings I had for you now. I didn't before, because I had no context. I've been alone for most of my life, and I didn't know what 'family' meant. But I know now that what I felt for you, what I mistook for something... more intimate, was really... well, *sisterly*."

"Despite my being able to, well, I believe the term was 'stop traffic'?" he grinned at her, teasing.

She giggled, "Despite that. You are a very attractive man, Harry Potter."

"Too bad about my personality, huh?" he laughed.

Hermione laughed with him. "Very attractive, and not just physically."

"Yeah, yeah," he sighed, "That's what all the gorgeous women say."

Hermione blushed at the compliment, then remembered who it was she was talking to. "Harry, you once told me that you would be my big brother, if I ever wanted one."

Harry smiled, "Seventh year, right after..."

"Right after I lost my parents," she confirmed at his pause. "Harry, I've lost seventeen years of having a family. I'd kind of like... well, are you still up for being my big brother?"

"For you, Mione, anything," he confirmed.

Hermione smiled, then stood. "Well, I've taken up enough of your time..."

"Mione?"

"Yes?"

"How are those memories coming?" he asked quietly.

"Well..."

"I only ask because... well, our relationship isn't the only one that hasn't really changed, despite the time and... confusion."

Hermione blushed, knowing full well what Harry was talking about, but feeling rather uncomfortable talking about it.

"Mione?"

"Harry, I know what you're saying, but I just... I just need some time."

"Of course you do."

"I've embarrassed myself enough for one day, I think."

"Just remember," he stood and came around the desk to her, pulling her into a brotherly hug. "There is a reason why he never married, Mione. And I think he's just as..."

"Harry?" she leaned back, looking up into his dark green eyes, her own misty with unshed tears. "Not now, okay?"

He looked into her eyes, seeing the pain and confusion there, and then hugged her close once again.

"Okay," he whispered into her hair. "Okay. But I'm here if you need me."

"Thanks," she sniffed into his shirt.

"Hey," he smiled against the top of her head. "That's what big brothers are for, right?"

Two weeks later, after spending a lot of time talking to Ginny, Molly, Harry and Ron, and even one long conversation with Bill Weasley, she was beginning to accept that being Hermione Granger wasn't such a terrible thing. She was getting much stronger, and she actually laughed a few times.

Harry and Ron, after paying a visit to Gringotts one afternoon, called her into Harry's office.

"Harry?" she entered after being told by Ginny that the two wanted to see her. "Ron? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Ron smiled. "We just need to do something, and we need to do it together."

"Two things, actually." Harry said. "We need to go out for a while... and you need to come with us."

"Okay," she looked at each of them, unsure of what was going on. "Now?"

"If you're ready," Harry confirmed.

"I... sure. Do I need a jacket?"

"No," Ron said. "We shouldn't be long."

With that, he held out his hand to her, and she took it, still confused. She was surprised when Harry took her other hand, and nodded to Ron. Instantly, she felt the odd feeling of apparating, and closed her eyes to keep from getting nauseous.

"Mione, we're here."

She opened her eyes, and saw that they were standing in a shady glade. The trees around them were tall, oaks and elms and sycamores, and the grass beneath their feet thick and dark.

"Where are we?" she asked in a small voice.

"Mione, it's time for you to say goodbye to someone," Ron said quietly.

She looked up at him, then beyond him to where a small white headstone rested under a willow.

"Dumbledore?" She asked.

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "We're here with you, Mione, but we'll stay back here. You need to do this."

"I know," she nodded, letting go of their hands with a quick squeeze. "I know. I just don't know how."

"It helped me..." Ron said, avoiding her eyes and speaking quietly. "It helped me to just talk about the final battle, and tell him all the things...well, that I wanted to say when he was around, but that you just don't say to someone for no reason."

She nodded.

"Just talk to him, Mione. He'll hear you." Harry said.

With tears in her eyes, and a quick glance at both of them, she walked slowly towards the grave. How was she to do this?

In the end, she was surprised at how easily it came to her. What surprised her was, she knew what his responses to her were. It was almost as though she was hearing them in her head.

"Professor," she said quietly, after she knelt down next to the gravestone. "I don't know if you can hear me..."

I hear everything.

"I miss you. And I'm sorry for... for my part... that day..."

I told you to remember, Hermione. Do you not remember?

"You've already forgiven me," she whispered. "You forgave me even as I did it."

Yes.

"But I don't know how to forgive myself," she said.

You need to allow yourself to believe that this happened for a reason. That your part in it was your gift, not your curse.

"What possible reason could there be to rob the world of the most powerful wizard, the best chance, we had?"

To allow the next to take his place. The more powerful wizard. I can admit it, he is much more powerful than I ever dreamt of being, but he couldn't step forward and fulfil his destiny while I was there, for others would not have followed him.

"I had to kill you so Harry could live?"

No, you did not kill me. You cast the curse, but I would have died that night, no matter who had done that. Imagine how much harder this would have been if Harry had been hit by Mr Malfoy's Imperious curse. Imagine how much harder it would have been for the magical world to follow the one that they felt had done this terrible thing.

"So I had to be the one?"

You chose to be the one, when you took Mr Malfoy's curse for him. You and Mr Weasley both told Harry repeatedly throughout your years preparing for the final battle that you would do anything for him. This was your destiny, Hermione, your part to play. You have saved the magical world by allowing Harry to remain the hero and lead our world.

Hermione looked back at her friends. Ron and Harry, sitting on the grass with their backs to her, giving her the privacy she needed to do this, but understanding that she wouldn't wish to be observed doing it.

"Thank you," she said simply. "I'm not sure if you really can hear me, or if I'm just ready to forgive myself, but I thank you, Professor, for everything. Everything you taught us, everything you did for us. For Harry. Thank you."

Be happy, Hermione Granger.

She sat there for a few moments longer, then smiled.

When she returned to the men, it was obvious they hadn't heard her, but they were silent, sitting watching the sheep grazing in a distant field. Hermione wondered if Dumbledore had chosen this spot or if Harry and Ron had, and why.

"Why here?" she asked suddenly.

"Sorry?" Ron jumped, startled by her presence.

"Why did you bury him here?"

"This was where he wanted to be," Harry said. "He left the coordinates in his will. Apparently, he wanted to look out over this scene for eternity."

"What is down there?"

"Look closely," Ron advised.

She looked, and realized that out beyond the fields of sheep and green rolling hills, in a valley, stood Hogwarts. Sighing, she sat down between them.

"I'd want that, too," she said. "It's... fitting."

"We thought so," Ron grinned.

"You...?"

"Dumbledore didn't want a service, at least not a traditional one," Harry explained. "Many, many drinks have been raised to his memory over the years, and he would have been fine with that. His final instructions were that Ron and I and Ron's brothers take care of the... necessary arrangements."

"We came out here, to where he specified, and dug the grave. Aberforth and a few members of the Order were the only ones other than Ron's family who attended. No one else knows where this is..."

Ron sighed. "It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

"Wasn't easy," Harry agreed. "But it was the way he wanted it."

"Where was I?" she asked quietly.

"At the school, in the infirmary."

They sat in silence for a while, before Ron stood.

"Time to move on," he said, holding his hand out to her.

"Home?" she asked.

"In a way," he smiled.

Again, she held hands between them, and closed her eyes, trusting them to take her where she needed to go.

"We're here." Ron said.

Hermione opened her eyes to find herself back in the room that Harry had apparated them to the day that he took her to Hogwarts.

"Ron? Harry?"

"This is your home, Hermione. I told you that day..." Harry said. "When you were... changed, the title was given by Gringotts to Ron and I. In essence, you died that day, and your will was put into effect."

"I don't want..."

"Hermione, this is a place of healing." Ron said. "It helped you through losing your parents. You need to find that again."

"Ron, I don't want to be alone!"

"Hermione," Harry took her shoulders, turning her to face him and look into his eyes. "You never have to leave Potter Manor. It is your home for as long as you wish it to be. But this place, this is *your* cottage. Ron and I, we never lived here, no one has lived here since you left. It is yours. Treat it as a cottage, a bolt hole, whatever you need it to be, but it is yours, and it can help you to heal."

"Can I still stay with you?"

"For as long as you want to," Harry smiled. "That won't change. Ever. But this place... it's *your* place. Understand?"

"Yes," she said quietly, nodding. "Yes. Thank you."

"Now," Ron stated. "Can we go eat? I'm starving."

Ah, my reviewers...I get such a boost from your comments! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

James Milamber: *You're kidding me? I was absolutely certain that you had it figured out! No, she's ALWAYS been Hermione... That was one of the original premises of the story. Actually, I was going to end the story there, but with the incredible response I've had (due in no small part to you, thank you!) I've realized I can get away with*

continuing. And as for your earlier kind comments, according to the publishers I've submitted other work to, "crap" is ALL I write. I've got enough rejection slips to wallpaper a room. I wanted to be a journalist when I was young and impressionable. Then when I joined the staff of a paper, I realized just how much of it is all about spin, and decided that it wasn't for me. Then I joined a periodical, and found it only got worse. I, too, turned to writing fiction... for my own amusement for the most part. This is my first fanfic... and has been an absolute hoot to write.

Texasjeannette: You know, I was going to skip ahead a few months, after the revelations of the last chapter, but your comments have made me see that I can't get away with not showing Hermione's recovery and healing from this, and how those around her respond. Therefore, this one's for you!

Azntgr01: I thought I might have given it away at the end of Chapter 14 with the "secret keeper" comment, maybe that's what made you think of Hermione.

Pirate grlEe: Thanks – it's the twists and turns that make a story, right?

Lalaluu: Well, you know, I kind of wondered if it wasn't coming across... I thought at times that the things she said and did (and how she said and did them) HAD to give it away!

Merlindamage: Well, we'll see. I like the idea of Ron sweating a bit...

Larna Mandrea: You have no idea of how difficult it has been to keep it all straight! Now that it's out, I hope the writing will go easier. Thank you so much for your kind comments, it means a lot!

Shotgunn: Page three of the Sun is legendary, even in Canada. Reviewing your piece was no hardship – I am really enjoying the story. And we might get a new chapter... when? Also, the PM was fully aware of the existence of Harry's world, but politics, you know... and besides, he and the majority of the members of the House of Lords are dead, anyhow. How's that for British social commentary? (I'm ducking....)

Saerry Snape: HAH!!! Gotcha! Fluff is good. At the core of it, I think the HP books are about love, and the different effects that a lack of it can do to people. They're also about tolerance, and celebrating our differences, and all the joy that can be ours in life, if we just understand that bad stuff sometimes comes with the good. That, to me, is the core of why stories with "fluff" are generally well-liked... because none of us can really do without it.

Katherine Rose: Thanks – I've been having such a good time writing this that I find it hard to NOT write... as you could tell if you could see the state of my kitchen right now. I have an eight year old gnawing on my arm because he's hungry... and my husband asked me last night if he could PLEASE get some clean underwear today... oh well, when the muse is active, one must follow it!

CQ

Chapter Seventeen: Then Comes Marriage

Hermione stood, her head to the side, considering her creation.

The peonies have to be moved. They're in the way there, she thought.

"Mione!" Ron's voice called from the porch. "Come on! We're going to be late!"

"This has to look perfect, Ron!"

"It *does* look perfect. It's beautiful. Now get your butt in here and get ready! Mom is having kittens because you're not there yet!"

"I am ready, Ron," she said, walking past him into the dim interior of the cottage, made more so by the intense June sunshine outside. She went into the kitchen and washed her hands.

"Women always say that, then they take another..." he stopped abruptly at the narrow-eyed look she gave him. Suddenly, his voice became very cheerful, "Alrighty then, let's go."

He stepped behind her, and she swatted at his hands as his arms went around her.

"I want to do it myself!"

"And splinch yourself an hour before the wedding of the year? I think not. Ginny would draw and quarter me, and bat-bogey hex my remains. Now, behave yourself."

Before she could swat his hands away again, the room was dissolving around her, to be replaced by the laneway outside the huge front gates of Hogwarts. Two young men stood there, and when they saw Ron and Hermione, they grinned and opened the gates for them.

They made their way up to the huge front entrance, and found those doors wide open. There were a few people milling around, but most of the guests were still outside, enjoying the refreshments being served and wandering about the school grounds.

Molly rushed up to them, smiling, and shooed Ron away.

“Go! Harry needs you in the anteroom off the Hall. Go!”

“Mum...”

“I’ll take care of Hermione, go on!”

When he was gone, she turned to Hermione. “You look beautiful, love.”

“Thank you, Molly. How is Ginny?”

“Wonderful. Nervous. Eager,” Molly laughed. “Just as the bride ought to be.”

Hermione indicated the bouquet she had collected in her garden. “I brought these for her. I didn’t know if she had arranged for a bouquet...it’s a tradition in the muggle world...”

“Yes, of course. She’ll love them.”

“The garden is ready, Molly.”

“Perfect, dear. Harry and Ginny so wanted to have their photo done under that huge willow of yours. Now go to her.”

“Molly?” Arthur’s voice came from direction of the Great Hall. “Are we ready, love?”

“We have half an hour yet, dear,” Molly called. “Hermione is just heading up there now.”

She turned to Hermione. “Silly man, he’s been as nervous as a cat today.”

Arthur, as Minister of Magic, had the authority to perform marriages. Ginny and Harry had asked him to officiate for them. Ginny’s girls were giving her away, and Ron and Hermione were standing as witnesses.

“Go to Ginny, love,” Molly urged her towards the grand staircase.

Hermione nodded and headed up the stairs, towards Gryffindor Tower. Minerva had arranged for them to have the Head Girl's room there to prepare in. When she arrived at the entrance to the common room, she smiled, and spoke the password as it had been given to her that morning.

"Harry loves Ginny."

She entered and walked up the stairs to the girls dorms, and up, until she came to the final door, the private room held by the head girl. She opened it and stuck her head around, seeing Ginny and her girls giggling together on the bed.

"Gin?" Hermione smiled.

"Hermione!" Ginny jumped off the bed, looking more like one of the teenagers than their mother. She was flushed, but then suddenly went white. "Is it time?"

"Just about."

Ginny sighed. "I'm thirty four years old. You'd think I'd be more collected than this."

"It's your wedding day, Ginny. I think you can be forgiven for being nervous."

"What if..." Ginny glanced over at the girls, then lowered her voice. "What if he..."

"He loves you, Ginny. He always has. He decided at nineteen years old that if he couldn't have you, he didn't want anyone. He's been there through every single event of your adult life, even though it would have been easier to leave, to not have to watch you being happy with someone else. Please do not tell me that you doubt his love."

Ginny smiled, then sighed. "You're right."

"Ginny?" Hermione hesitated. "Have you told him... what you told me? About your marriage, and Dean?"

"Yes, most of it."

"Don't hold back, okay? He needs to know all of it."

"I know, Hermione. But not today."

"No," Hermione agreed. "Not today. Today we get you married! I brought you these..." She handed Ginny the bouquet.

"Oh, Hermione, they're lovely! Thank you!" Ginny brought the blooms to her face, and breathed deeply. They reminded her of Hermione's garden, and the many times her family had gathered there to pay tribute to the ones they'd lost.

Family really was the most important thing in the world. The one you had, and the one you made.

Then, Bill's voice called from the bottom of the stairs, and Hermione smiled. "It's time."

She plucked at her robes, sea green and styled much like Ginny's wedding robes, but with a bit of dark green ribbon around the sleeves and neckline.

"You look fine, Hermione. Beautiful." Ginny said. "Ron'll love it."

Hermione flushed, "I want to look nice for you and Harry, not that git of a brother of yours."

"Sure, Hermione," Ginny shoved her out the door and down the stairs, the girls following them. "Now, go. And tell Bill we're right behind you, but no one is allowed to see me until I stand at the top of that staircase!"

Hermione met Bill at the bottom of the stairs.

"She's coming, but she doesn't want anyone to see her until she comes to the top of the stairs down there."

"Fair enough," Bill said. He leaned in to give her a brotherly kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad you found your way back to us, Hermione. We missed you."

"Thank you," she said, tears in her eyes. How could she have forgotten this family?

"She's coming?"

"Right behind us."

"Then let's get this show on the road."

He escorted her to the corridor at the top of the grand staircase, then winked at her. "See you down there."

"Right behind you."

She waited until he disappeared and then turned to see Ginny and the girls enter the hallway behind her. Bill reaching the bottom of the staircase was the cue for the music, and the third note was her cue to reveal herself at the top of the staircase. She turned, and looked over her shoulder to see Ginny and the girls coming. Catching Ginny's eye, she winked, then gave her a thumbs up sign, and a brilliant smile, and then rounded the corner and stepped onto the first step, revealing herself to the crowd below.

Ginny was nervous. Her girls urged her forward, but she hesitated.

It couldn't be possible. This was a dream, or a delusion. Harry Potter couldn't possibly want her as his wife. Who on earth did she think she was to deserve him?

She glanced forward again, seeing Hermione standing at the end of the corridor. She hadn't stepped out to the top of the staircase yet, she was looking back over her shoulder at Ginny.

With a cocky grin and a wink, she gave Ginny the thumbs up, then she turned on that brilliant smile that only Hermione was capable of, and turned, stepping out onto the staircase.

How does she do it? Ginny wondered. Three months ago she learned that it was her wand that killed a wizard more precious to the magical world than any other, with perhaps the exception of Harry.

Yet today, she stepped out in front of hundreds of people, knowing they knew that horrible thing about her, and overcame her own self-doubt enough to smile like that and face them. Where did strength like that come from?

There always was more to Hermione than most people suspected. Harry had seen it, even as a child. Ginny had recognized it through their school years. Sometimes, even Ron got glimpses of it.

And if my idiot of a brother doesn't get it together, it's going to be lost to him again, Ginny thought.

Today, she would become Mrs Harry Potter. She would stand in front of the magical world at his side, and declare her intention to spend eternity with him. If Hermione had the courage to face that crowd, she certainly did!

With determination, she stepped forward, into sight of the crowd below.

Harry stood in front of the doors into the Great Hall. They were closed now, and Arthur stood in front of them. They had decided to marry in the huge entrance hall because this was the place that had welcomed them back so often during their years here.

Harry looked around at the people there. The Daily Prophet was calling theirs the wedding of the year. Harry knew it was the wedding of his life, the only one he would ever have, and he thanked the fates that had led he and Ginny back to each other.

At the shuffling and muttering of the guests, he turned and looked as his future brother-in-law, Bill, came quickly down the steps, a smile on his face. As he reached the bottom, he gave a nod, the signal for the music to begin.

Harry looked up as the first notes echoed in the hall. They had chosen a classical piece that they both enjoyed, and Harry knew that Hermione was to appear at the head of the stairs on the third note.

She was only one note late, and Harry smiled when he saw her. Dressed in green, with her hair pulled back into cinnamon brown curls which tumbled down her back, she looked like a medieval princess. Ginny had insisted that if Harry got to have her brother stand beside him, she would have Harry's honorary sister stand next to her. Hermione had objected at first, knowing that people would talk, but Harry had been thrilled with the thought of having both Ron and Hermione stand witness to his marriage vows.

He heard Ron, from where he was standing next to him, catch his breath.

"Dear Merlin," Ron whispered.

"She's beautiful," Harry commented quietly, as Hermione, glowing, came down the staircase.

"Unbelievable," Ron said in an undertone.

As Hermione gained the last step, Harry's eyes were drawn upwards. Standing at the head of the grand staircase was his family. Ginny and her girls, looking like angels.

Harry didn't know what the color was called that she wore. It wasn't white, but it wasn't... not. It was warm, and made her hair, which was down around her shoulders as he loved it, glow.

Or maybe she would have glowed wearing anything. Harry couldn't tear his eyes from her as she and the girls proceeded down the stairs. There were gasps around the huge hall as people saw her. She was beautiful.

"Dear God..." he said. "I am the luckiest man alive."

"And don't you forget it, Harry. She loves you with all her heart." Ron said, watching his sister as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

The next twenty minutes were a blur, and later, all Harry could really recall was gazing into Ginny-brown eyes, and feeling joy.

When Arthur Weasley, with a catch in his voice, pronounced the union complete, Harry drew her into his arms and just looked at her for a moment, before whispering, "You have made me the happiest man in the world, Ginny Potter."

With that, he leaned down and kissed her reverently, holding her as though she were a bit of spun glass that might shatter at a firm touch. He only surfaced when he became aware of the applause.

With flushed smiles, the new Mr and Mrs Potter turned to greet those who had come to witness the marriage, at long last, of Harry Potter and the girl who owned his heart.

Later that night, Harry held his new wife to his bare chest as they stood in one of the guest suites at the school. He couldn't believe he was finally standing here, Ginny Weasley in his arms, and it would be this way from this point forward. Forever.

"Ginny, dear God, I love you." He said as he kissed her.

"Harry?" Ginny's voice was hesitant. "I need to..."

"What is it?" He pulled back, concerned.

"I need to ask you something..."

"What?" He smiled as he brushed a lock of her hair away from her face.

"I... I know I'm bringing three children to this marriage..."

"I love your girls as if they were my own, Gin. They *are* my own, now."

"I know," she smiled softly. "I know that three children are... well, a lot to raise these days, and I know that you would never deny the girls anything."

“Ginny, it's my job to provide for them, and for you, and I'm thrilled to be allowed to do it.” Harry stepped back. “What is it that you're trying to say?”

“Harry, there are a lot of children in my family, and I know how hard it was, financially, for my parents to raise us all, and provide...”

“Ginny,” he smiled, “I don't want you to ever, ever be concerned about money again. We're very comfortable, and it's never going to be a concern. Ever. Do you understand?”

“Yes...” Ginny hesitated. “Harry, would it be too much to ask for more?”

“More what, Gin'?” he was confused.

“More babies,” she whispered. “I know, three children is a lot, but... I really want to have a baby, Harry. With you.”

Harry was silent so long that Ginny panicked.

“I'm sorry, I know...”

“Ginny?” Harry's voice sounded strange. “Do you really mean that?”

“I... yes...”

“I didn't think that it would be fair, to ask you...” His voice caught. “I want you to know that I'd be happy with just us and the girls, that they're as much my own as they would be if... I don't want you to feel that you have to...”

“Harry?”

“Ginny, I would love to have more children. With you. As many as we can possibly manage.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

"It might take a while," Ginny said. "I'm not as young as I was when I had the girls."

"I think I'm up to it," Harry laughed down at his new wife. "But just in case, maybe we'd better get started. You know, practice makes perfect."

To my reviewers:

I think the overwhelming response to last chapter is, I'd better plan on continuing this story for a while!

James Milamber: *Tell your friend that a crazy Canuck will be after him if he doesn't let you borrow his computer until yours is fixed. I need my reviews, and I need my chapter updates from HPMM! Once again, your review makes me want to write. Too bad my kids' math lesson needs to be done right now. You know, I considered the fact that Harry was too strong for Malfoy's curse, but then I thought, he's a bit distracted with the whole Voldemort thing, and he's probably got more Death Eaters heading for him than any other wizard there, so I figured he'd be distracted enough for it to at least be a threat. Besides, it was Hermione's destiny. As for my little phrases, you're more than welcome to use any of them. That particular one is a "Canadianism" I guess, and used pretty often here.*

Shotgunn: *You were one of two. You and James Milamber both said things that were specific enough that it made me think you'd figured it out. Ah, well, the cat is out of the bag now! The "conversation" with Dumbledore kind of just happened. Who am I kidding, the entire chapter "kind of just happened"! But I like the way it came together. I understand that it's the last week of summer, and college beckons, but I'm really enjoying your story, and can't wait until the next chapter comes out. If I remember my uni days accurately (and there is some doubt that I do, living as I did on Jolt cola, coffee and Mars bars...), the opportunity for sleep was fleeting, so I'll try to be patient!*

Larna Mandrea: *Once again, your review had me smiling and feeling good. Which at eight o'clock on a Monday morning is really something. I thank you. Rest assured, no stopping in the foreseeable*

future. From here on out, I'm winging it, because I only PLANNED up until the big reveal.

Azntgr01: Thanks, Dumbledore's answers were incredibly easy to write. He's not hard, because he's so predictable in canon.

Merlindamage: Yes, I've considered it. But if I think too hard on it it'll either go away never to return, or it will take over the motivation for writing THIS story, and this one would fizzle, and then I think Larna Mandrea might hunt me down... I'll think about it more when I've completed this one.

Saerry Snape: Fluff is good – you're going to LOVE this chapter... hehehe!

GiGiFanfic: I love my reviews, and my reviewers, and any observations you have are welcome, because they help me see how the story is being perceived, and it helps me write better. I'm glad you've passed on the story to others, as well. It tells me that people really ARE enjoying it! Thanks!

UnRealityCheck: HEY! How did you get inside my head? That was a GREAT review, and very, very rewarding for me to know that my clues were being picked up on, but not so obvious as to give away the story entirely. Makes me think I'm not being completely delusional when I think I'm being clever!

CQ

Chapter Eighteen: And so it begins...

Harry and Ginny spent the following week wandering around Hogwarts and the nearby village, and apparating away to various locations that Harry would not disclose. Every day he took Ginny somewhere new, and would only grin and shake his head when anyone asked where they were going, or where they had been.

Ginny was even more close-mouthed. When asked, she would flush red and hurriedly leave the room.

It wasn't until Molly found out that the others had been questioning them about their honeymoon activities and put her foot down and told them all to leave the newlyweds alone that the good-natured teasing ended.

Hermione spent her nights and mornings at Potter Manor, continuing to write for The Sun, and meeting with Stephen Lewis, before flooing to her little cottage. She had discovered boxes full of personal belongings in the attic that, she assumed she had had no time to unpack. Her memories of the time between the death of her parents and the final battle continued to be hazy, and both Ron and Harry had advised her to not push it.

Ron confirmed for her that she had never properly unpacked, with the pressure of training directly out of Hogwarts, and then one thing and another, the boxed belongings from Hogwarts and her parents home, what there were left, had stayed that way. Ginny had put her clothes and the few things she *had* had out away with the other things in the attic the year after the battle.

A few days after the wedding, Ron apparated with her to the cottage to bring the boxes down for her. As the room came into focus around them, she smiled.

"What?"

"You still make me hold your hand when we do that."

"Do what?"

"Apparate."

"Well, you know..."

"I know, less likely to splinch myself, right?"

"Right," he muttered, busying himself with the door to the attic stairs.

"You know the boxes I want?" she called after him as he headed up.

"They're the only ones up here, Hermione. I don't think I can miss them, do you?"

Shaking her head, she went to prepare tea and biscuits, knowing that within minutes Ron would be grouching about having nothing to eat. One thing that had remained constant through the years was Ron's appetite. Strangely, he didn't show an extra ounce of flesh...

Hermione felt the heat in her face and quickly changed the topic of her thoughts from Ron's anatomy to getting the correct number of spoonfuls of sugar in the tea cups.

It took him three trips, but he did it in record time, and by the time the tea was ready, the six boxes stood in the middle of her lounge floor. Hermione brought the tea tray in, and set it on the little table for him to help himself while she opened the first box.

"Ugh, Mione...I like it sweet, but how much sugar did you put in here?"

Hermione flushed again, then shrugged. "Pour yourself a new cup if you don't like it."

With that, she began to empty the box. There were a few jackets and shoes, and some makeup bits and pieces. She pulled out a polished wooden box from the bottom and opened it. It was a jewellery case.

There were few items in it, a few pairs of cheap earrings that a teenager would find appealing, a few chains, and a plastic-banded watch with a neon face, the type that had been popular in the late eighties. She lifted the top compartment off, and sighed. Underneath

were a few other pieces, but one jumped out at her. She lifted it from the velvet box lining, and held it to dangle in front of her, the golden chain ended in a blue and red mottled stone the size of a grape.

"I wanted you to have something that reminded you of me, I have so much that reminds me of you..."

Hermione heard the voice in her head, and smiled. Hearing a sound behind her, she turned, the smile still in place.

"You still have that."

"I can't believe I forgot I had it," she said. "It was my seventeenth birthday."

"I wanted you to have..."

"Something that reminded me of you. Yes. I wore it every day, you know."

"Really?"

"Under my uniform."

Ron nodded, apparently embarrassed, but for once, not blushing. "What else is in there?"

"A bunch of junk," she said.

"What's that in the bottom?" He pointed down into the box, where there was a smaller, flat box left.

"I don't know," she said, lifting it out. Opening it, she sighed, then felt the tears well up into her eyes. "Oh... Ron..."

"What is it, Mione?"

She lifted the item out of its flat box and turned it so he could see. It was a picture frame, and in it, a photo of two middle aged people, a man and a woman. The photo was very obviously not posed, it looked to be on a beach somewhere, but the most striking thing about

it were the woman's tawny hair and the fact that she was laughing joyfully up into the man's eyes.

It was Hermione. Well, not really, but the woman that Hermione had become had certainly changed from the girl he remembered, and this woman, with her shorter hair and knowing eyes, looked much like the woman sitting crosslegged on the floor in front of him.

It was Laura and David Granger.

"Mione, you okay?" He asked softly.

"I never realized..." she sighed, tears in her voice. "I had forgotten them for so long, that when I remembered, when Harry gave me back my memories, I forgot that I missed them. Does that make any sense?"

"You've had a lot to deal with in the last few months, Mione."

"But they were my *parents*, Ron!"

"But they've been gone for eighteen years, Mione. You did your grieving, then."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"I can't remember." she sighed. "Ron, I remember more about Adam and Melissa Kennedy than I do about these people, and they weren't even *real*."

"They were real to you, Maura. That's real enough."

"Is it?" she asked absently. "Sometimes I can't... I find myself remembering something, and then I have to think, now, was that as Hermione, or was that a false memory as Maura?"

"It's all you," he said quietly. "All those memories make you you, so none of them are invalid, Mione."

With a smile, she gazed at the picture in her hands, then turned her face up to look at him, "I suppose you're right. I'm still me, and I wouldn't be *this* me if I hadn't had the experience of being Maura Kennedy. Thank you, Ron, for pointing that out to me."

Ron stood there, not sure of how to respond. Instead, he pulled another box over to her, and slit it open. "Let's get this stuff cleared away, huh? Then I'll treat you to a meal in Diagon Alley."

"Whoohoo, big spender," she teased.

"Hey, if you promise me a smile, I might even spring for a pre-dinner drink," he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Laughing, she dived into the second box, knowing that, despite everything going on around them, the war gearing up, the lives being lost, that everything would be okay. She was back in the world she belonged in, she had Ron, and Harry and Ginny, and the rest of the Weasley clan. She had a family around her, and everything was going to be just fine.

The staff of Hogwarts was working double time. The new program for muggles had more applicants than it could handle, and the search was constant for qualified instructors. The first four week program began in the middle of July. Forty people between the ages of fourteen and thirty-eight spent four weeks learning basic Potions and Defense, and took British military tactical and basic training.

After four weeks, twenty-six of the forty were offered a further four weeks to study Transfiguration, Charms and advanced Defense. Twenty-two of these accepted.

The decision had been made to process these 'monthers' as they were being referred to, through Dumbledore House. Housed in the largest tower with more, if slightly smaller, dormitories, it was well suited to a changing population. In addition, it had two common rooms, which would accommodate more people.

Working at full capacity, one hundred monthers could be accommodated at any given time. The program would overlap groups,

as well, so that those who had been there a while could assist the newcomers.

Granger House was to be, at its core, an inspiration to those working their way through the basic program. Those who completed the basic four weeks and then the further four week extension, and who scored well on all their assessments and showed higher ability would be offered a place here. Instead of "years", they would have seven "levels" of study, reflecting the traditional seven years program, but based largely on self-study. The decision to organize the newcomers in this way had been made at an Order meeting.

That particular meeting of the Order was called in late June, days before Minerva said she must have the letters out to students. They had agreed to meet to make the final plans for the eight week training sessions.

"Well, do we have enough students to do this, then, Minerva?" Harry asked as they sat down in the War Room. Every member of the Order was there, and Colin Creavey and Lieutenant Howell, as well.

"Enough students?" Minerva asked, "Harry, we have enough applications for students aged eleven through seventeen to open another school, much less two new houses. And that doesn't even begin to take into consideration the number of adults we've had applications from."

The people in the room sat, stunned. Ginny and Hermione, Janey and Amelia were the only ones not employed by the school to know the extent of the response. They had been the ones who sorted through the letters.

"Min?" Harry sounded unsure, "You're kidding, right?"

"Harry, we need to discuss the ramifications of this. We require not two new houses, but at least four. Unless we begin turning applicants away..."

"How many?" Harry turned to Hermione.

"At least four hundred, at last count."

"Four *hundred*?" Arthur Weasley gasped.

"So, rather a better response than we had figured on." Harry smiled.

"Yes, rather." Minerva said dryly. "I just don't know how to accommodate them all."

"We have two new houses... accommodations for that many are not a problem?" Harry asked.

"Dumbledore and Granger houses are easily accommodated. We have the two unused towers that we have renovated to make do, but we were thinking in terms of the traditional ten new students per house per year...which comes out to roughly seventy students per house. We could possibly stretch that to one hundred, but..."

"Are there any more areas of the castle that could be used to accommodate more houses?"

"Harry, it's not just the living space," Snape said. "We need to have classrooms to accommodate these new students, as well..."

"Four hundred additional students is quite a number..."

"And we're getting more applications every day," Janie said. "It's going to be even more than that when all is said and done."

Harry thought for a moment. "Okay, obviously not all of these students are going to be of a level to take a complete Hogwarts education..."

"No, I would doubt if one of every five of them will be, but..." Minerva started.

"So, we have the four week training, invite those who perform well to stay on for the additional four weeks, just as we were planning for the adults. Amalgamate the programs. A select few may be asked to stay on for a complete education, but we retain *one* house for that purpose, and feed the students into it according to their ability. The others go away happy with the basic ability to defend themselves and their

families, and we get some decent wizards and witches at the end of the day.

"In seven years," Snape commented. "When it might be all over."

Harry glanced at him, "No, Severus. We accelerate these students through based on their test scores. We give them the material, and allow them to progress at their own rate, with basic instruction from the volunteers, and those who perform well on the testing, move on. Those who do not take what they've learned, and leave. Make it so that entry into each successive level is by invitation, not assumed."

"The way education should be," Hermione commented. "Don't hold back those that are ready to move on based on their age and peer group, but allow them to progress and move on as they are ready for more advanced education."

The teachers present glanced at each other. Why hadn't it been thought of before?

"We could have seventh years that get through the program in weeks..." Severus said.

"That's why we don't call them 'years'," said Harry, thinking on his feet. "We call them 'levels' and then no one can question it. It will be performance-based, and when you're ready to move on you do, and not until. And we'll have some decently able people ready in months, not years."

"Excellent suggestion, Mr Potter," Minerva smiled. "We'll need to redesign the curriculum to reflect the importance of self-study, and the students will have to have the booklists for all seven levels..."

Harry nodded, "I would assume that some of the books will have to be different, as well. Not many of the texts that we learned with lend themselves well to independent study..."

"I can do that," Hermione found herself speaking. "I know most of the books..."

Harry grinned. "Who better? Hermione, if you wouldn't mind, I would be delighted if you could pull together a revised booklist for each year. Consult with the instructors, and I'll see you set up with an account at Flourish and Blotts so that you can get whatever you need to review."

"Done, Harry," she smiled. This was her first assignment beyond her link with the muggle world. She was thrilled, and nervous.

"So, Minerva," Harry turned back to the aging headmistress. "We'll restrict the letters to the new students, other than those traditionally accepted into Hogwarts, to an invitation to a four week program, with the explanation that those passing the final examinations may be invited to return for the expanded program?"

"That will allow me to get the letters out sooner rather than later, as well," she confirmed. "With no book lists to be concerned about, the letters can go out as soon as we get some scheduling worked out."

"I... Minerva, I was wondering if you might like me to help you with that?" Ginny asked, her cheeks pink. "Mom is taking care of things here, for now, and Janie and Amelia have Hermione's office covered..."

"I would be glad of the help, Ginny," Minerva said. "But it's rather soon for you to be worried about being out working, isn't it?"

"The war will be here before we know it," Ginny returned. "Honeymoons or otherwise, we all need to do what we can. And I can do this."

"Very well," Minerva stood. "Perhaps you could come and meet with me at the school tomorrow?"

Ginny agreed, and the meeting was formally brought to a close.

Harry was pleasantly surprised when he met the first group. Minerva had insisted that he be present to greet each group on their first day. As it was his name plastered all over the Muggle press, she had decided it was best to get the distraction of Harry Potter over with.

It would be his job to greet the new arrivals at Hogwarts. Minerva was certain there would be questions specific to the books, and wanted Harry to be the one to either confirm or deny the "facts" that the participants arrived believing.

The original group met early one July day in a private room at Kings Cross station. They were met there by three ministry aurors, and it was explained to them how they would be travelling to Hogwarts. Many scoffed. Touch a stone and be magically transported? More were excited. *This* was real. They had *known* it!

Eventually, all had touched the portkey and found themselves on board a train. It was old fashioned, but clean and bright, and moving at a considerable speed.

It was the Hogwarts Express.

When they arrived at the school, Harry Potter was late. He was supposed to be in the entry hall to greet them, but instead, when the great doors opened, he was only halfway down the great staircase, and moving quickly. Minerva awaited him at the bottom, standing in the summer sunshine that was invading the cool hall through the open doors.

Three Aurors, Kingsley, Tonks and a third that Harry couldn't place, entered, leading forty people who looked mildly stunned. As a group, they turned to look at the dark-haired man who was currently descending toward them.

"Good morning," Harry said.

"Dear God!" a woman in the front choked, "Are you...?"

Harry smiled, "Yes, I'm Harry Potter. Welcome to Hogwarts."

At that, the woman promptly fainted. After ensuring that she'd be fine, Harry grinned at the group.

"I can't say I've had that effect on women very often," he joked. Several chuckles were heard. "As I was saying, welcome to Hogwarts."

You have the distinction of being the first non-magical people to attend this school. I thank you for your faith in us."

They were a motley crew. Harry spied several tattooed youths, the older members of the group looked a bit rag-tag, and the several teens huddled together, looking a little bewildered.

"It's my pleasure to welcome you here. Others will explain the program you've been accepted to, and what will be expected of you, but I am sure that you all have plenty of questions. I am generally around at some point each day or two, and I want you to know that you are always free to speak with me."

A hand shot up near the back of the group, "Umm... excuse me...?"

"Yes?" Harry looked at the man.

"I... I wanted to ask... um... did you really...?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed at the man's hesitation. "Yes, there was a dark wizard named Tom Riddle who referred to himself as Lord Voldemort. And yes, when I was eighteen, I defeated him. Beyond that, much of what is in the books is... loosely based on fact."

"And Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger?"

"My two best friends at school, and now. You'll meet them eventually," Harry confirmed with a smile. "Now... Professor McGonagall has several things she needs to show you. I will be around if you should need to speak to me. Please remember, you are very welcome here, and there is nothing here to be frightened of. Now, I shall leave you in the headmistress's capable hands."

Minerva shot a rather cool look at Harry, who grinned mischievously at her. She began organizing the new arrivals into groups for dormitory assignments and Harry escaped to her office where he used her floo to get back to Potter Manor, and Ginny's waiting arms.

Ginny was, in fact, waiting impatiently for him. She was sitting on a straight-backed chair at the kitchen table as he stumbled through the kitchen floor.

"Man, I hate taking the floor..." he muttered, righting himself and brushing off his sleeves.

"How did it go?" Ginny asked, standing.

"It went," he said. "Honestly, I'm glad it's over. I don't know why Minerva had to insist..."

"Because you're Harry Potter," Ginny moved into his arms, "and Min doesn't want to have to fight constant speculation on your existence while trying to teach them how to stay alive."

"Hmm," he agreed, wrapping his arms around her waist. "I suppose you're right."

"Distraction can be... counterproductive," Ginny said, placing a line of kisses along his jaw. He smiled. It constantly amazed him at how small she felt in his arms, when the reality of her filled his world.

"Yes..." he agreed. "It can..."

"Speaking of which," she pulled back. "Ron and Bill are waiting for you."

"Oh?" Harry sighed, disappointed. Ron and Bill's company was never quite as... rewarding... as Ginny's.

"In your office," she said, turning away.

With another sigh, and a longing look at his wife's very shapely backside, Harry took himself off down the hall.

"This had better be good," he grumbled as he entered to find the brothers leaning over the long work table to one side of his desk, looking at something they had spread out there.

"Well," Bill looked up at him. "I suppose that would depend entirely on your definition of 'good'."

Harry continued into the room and slouched down in the chair behind his desk, swivelling it to look at the two men.

"A good enough reason for me to leave my new wife and her very... tempting... talents and come in here to see you instead."

Ron merely smiled, which made Harry sit up straight and pay closer attention. Presented with so obvious an opportunity to mock him, the fact that Ron's response was a restrained smile and nothing more told him that something big must have happened.

"What is it?"

"There have been more attacks..." Ron began.

"Muggle or...?"

"Mostly wizarding families," Ron said quietly.

"When?"

"A little over an hour ago," Bill said. "Harry, you've got to see this."

Bill shuffled some papers as Harry stood and walked to the table. Spread there was a map, a very large map, of Europe. On the map were many, many red dots. Hundreds of them.

"These are the locations of the attacks..." Ron said.

"You have got to be kidding me..." Harry breathed.

They formed a shape. The same shape Harry had seen many times prior to the last war, the same shape that Maura Kennedy had innocently presented them a picture of months ago in this very room, the very same shape that Severus Snape *still* had tattooed into his arm, for there was no way to remove it. The Dark Mark.

The third war of the muggle world had started months ago. The third war of the magical world was beginning, today, in earnest.

Reviews, reviews, reviews, reviews... that's what makes the world go 'round... or the writer write, for that matter. Thanks again, to all of you who reviewed.

Katherine Rose: Warm fuzzies are good!

Larna Mandrea: You now hold the record for the most consecutive adjectives used in a single review.

Merlindamage: Is there such a thing as "bad fluff"? Does it qualify as "fluff" if it makes squirm with disbelief as you read it? Hmmm...

SaerrySnape: You fluff-lover you! I had no idea!

Shotgunn: Do I get to play den mother? Or Molly Weasley? SCOTT! Where HAVE you been? Do you know it's 3:35 in the MORNING? Nah, I wouldn't do that to you. Really. I have enough trouble keeping track of my own kids, and they're both underage and neither of them can drive. I think. And just for you, we're gearing up for war stuff... I promise.

Spicysuga: Thanks!

James Milamber: You LAUGHED at my touching H/G fluff? I am truly ashamed. "The business end of a three day old trout"? I think you need to get some rest, my boy. Even though I agree that it's precisely what Ron needs, your verbiage leaves me speechless. In a good way. Ah, well, Hermione will take care of it, I'm sure.

CQ

Chapter Nineteen: The Death of a Wizard

In the following days, they learned more about the extent of the attack on the magical world. Information came in from America and Australia, Africa and Asia. All had similar reports. Massive coordinated attacks spread over hundreds, even thousands of miles, all mapping out into strange patterns.

The muggle world, for the most part, was convinced that the attacks were merely more terrorist activities, and this seemed to give them further resolve to fight it. Harry and the others were thankful for that. They were not yet prepared to deal with widespread panic.

Arthur, as Minister of Magic, received much information which was not freely available, nor even available through the Order's network. He brought home boxes of files every night, and sequestered himself with the others in Harry's office for hours at a time.

Pictures were flooding in of destroyed homes, sometimes entire towns. Personal reports from eyewitnesses spoke of massive explosions, strange looking people wearing strange clothing, and feelings of depression and extreme cold prior to the attacks.

Further horror stories of women and children being carried off by these creatures, screaming into the night, and the dying and injured left behind, unable to help.

Bodies began to appear, laying in parks miles from their destroyed homes, laying in stream beds and floating in rivers. Many reported missing were not found, simply added to the rosters of those who might never be seen again.

The muggle press called it full-scale terror attacks on British soil. Harry agreed, but knew that the origin of those terrorists was not some cave in Afghanistan, or a culture of desperate people more dead than alive from hunger and injustice. It was something much older, much darker, and he feared, as did the rest of the Order, that the muggle world hadn't seen anything yet.

The majority of the families attacked were wizarding families, or had some connection to the wizarding world, but many were simply

people. Quite often, they were neighbors to magical families, whom many in the magical world thought were the original targets of the attacks. Either those carrying out the attacks weren't good at reading maps, or when thwarted in the original plan, they had simply chosen to take out their aggression on the nearest available target.

Many of the most heinous attacks were on muggle families living near a wizarding family who had had the good luck to not be home at the time of the attack.

Harry and Ron, as trained Aurors, were able to access the sites. Some of the things that Harry witnessed that week, the true horror of what one human being was capable of doing to another, even after death, would stay with him, he was sure, beyond the grave. He had seen horrible things during the first war, especially during the final battle, but this... this depravity was unprecedented so far as he was concerned.

"Harry," Arthur said late one night after finishing reviewing some reports from the Cotswolds together. "I've been contacted by officials from most of Europe and Asia. They're looking to you for guidance in this, Harry."

"Me?" Harry looked up from the papers he was reading.

"Yes. You."

"Arthur... why me? You're the Minister..."

"Yes, Harry, I am," Arthur agreed tiredly, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes. He was not a young man, and the strain was beginning to show. "But perhaps it's time for me to step down."

"Arthur!" Harry sat back in his chair, shocked.

"Harry, I've seen two wars begin and end. I don't know if I've got the stamina for a third."

"We need you!" Harry said firmly.

"The magical world needs a hero, Harry. I've never been hero material, and certainly never wanted to be. You, on the other hand..."

"No. Not again," Harry said, shaking his head.

"Harry, I've always known that my appointment as Minister was just to keep things moving until you were ready to take over. The people are going to need someone that they can all believe in..."

"You." Harry stated.

"No, Harry. Not me. Many disagree with me, with my ways of doing things. Besides, I've never defeated a Dark Lord."

"Arthur..."

"Harry, enough. Molly and I have talked. It's time for me to step down. Would you have the position go to someone with political ambitions rather than the good of our world in mind? Someone like Fudge?"

Harry sighed, "I really don't want you to do this, Arthur. At least, not now."

"Harry, we all have to do what is best. This is what is best."

"You'll stay on as an advisor?" Harry asked.

"Of course. I'm not going anywhere, I'm just handing the reins over to a more capable wizard."

Harry snorted, "Does 'capable' go with 'scared spitless'? Because let me tell you..."

"You'll do fine, Harry."

"Well," Harry tossed the handful of papers down on his desk and rubbed his hands over his face in exhaustion. It was well past midnight and he'd been up since five that morning. "We still have to get through the election. Nothing is written in stone yet."

It was Arthur's turn to snort, "Like that is going to be a problem."

Half an hour later, Harry crawled between the sheets of the huge four poster bed he now shared with his wife. He moved around, shifting until he found a comfortable position. Ginny rolled over, curling into his side, her hair tickling his nose.

"Harry?" she murmured.

"Yes, love?"

"What time is it?"

"Around one."

"You need to be up in a few hours."

"Yes, love."

"You work too hard," she sighed, her lips soft against the skin of his neck.

"It needs to be done, Gin'."

"I love you."

"I know," he whispered.

As he drifted off, he felt her kiss his chest, and wrap herself around him.

How had he gotten so lucky?

Seamus Finnegan had been a dorm mate of Ron and Harry's from school. For seven years, he, Neville Longbottom, Dean Thomas, Ron and Harry had shared living space for ten months of every year.

He had grown from a skinny Irish boy with a penchant for blowing things up, into a handsome youth. Seamus had never lacked for dates to the various balls they had had at school. He had averaged four different girlfriends per year from his third year on, his personal best being seven in sixth year. And he wasn't always fussy about

ending it with one before moving on to another, sometimes in the same night.

He had had a reputation for being able to get his hands on just about anything. If you needed it, and didn't want it generally known either that you had it or where you had gotten it, you went to Seamus. All of his transactions were done with a grin and a bit of Irish blarney, and generally a wink and a pinch if you happened to be of the female persuasion.

His reputation for being able to put his hands on just about anything, should the need arise lent itself well to the illicit market for spirits in the boys' dorms of the boarding school, and not just the Gryffindor dorms. Seamus' trade crossed house lines freely. He was welcome in all common rooms, because it was generally known that he was probably there delivering something to someone.

After Hogwarts, he had continued on and trained as an auror, taking the traditional three years to complete the program. He was known as a reliable addition to any auror team, and had a reputation as a tenacious duellist, due, he claimed, to his training at the DA with Harry Potter. His activities as a womanizer and hard drinker carried on well after school.

He had fought next to Harry and Ron in the final battle, taking on his share of Death Eaters, seemingly unconcerned with his liberal use of unforgivable curses. He had cried later, after being told of Dumbledore's death and Hermione's part in it. They had had to physically restrain him from going after Malfoy and ripping him to shreds.

It was ten years later that he had met his come-uppance in the form of a tiny blackhaired firebrand by the name of Lacey McTigue. She was clear and outspoken about her beliefs and stood for none of Mr Finnegan's messing about. Within three months, Seamus had quit drinking, quit brawling, and married her.

They later managed to produce two boys, who were the joy and reason for Seamus' existence. Seamus Finnegan had finally grown up, and he was a happy and settled husband and father.

When Lacey and the boys were killed in the initial raids that year, Seamus turned to the only comfort he had known his entire life, besides his wife: Seamus turned back to Firewhiskey. Harry and Ron encountered him several times in the Leaky Cauldron, and either carted him home or to Potter Manor to sleep it off. Occasionally, they suspected more than just Firewhiskey, but said nothing, choosing instead to discuss it with Seamus later.

It was only when he stopped turning up in the Leaky Cauldron that they truly began to worry.

"You think he's here?" Ron asked, standing at the bottom of the dim stairs leading up to the room over Fortescues that Seamus had managed to rent after the destruction of his home and death of his family.

"I don't know, but we need to find out," Harry sighed. "Lord, Ron, this place is horrible."

"Seamus hasn't worked in a few months," Ron said. "Kingsley told me they just ended up not scheduling him, because he never showed up to his shifts, anyhow."

"If I'd known he was living like this..."

"Harry, you've got to stop bringing home strays, you know?"

"Seamus isn't a stray, Ron. He's lost his entire family. First his parents and brother in the last war, and now Lacey and the boys. I don't know how I would get up in the morning if it were me."

"Maybe he just doesn't," Ron commented, before turning stricken eyes on Harry when he realized what he had just said. "You don't think...?"

"Jesus, I hope not," Harry muttered. "Come on."

The scene they witnessed at the top of the stairs made both of them want to retch. The room was ridiculously neat, a white envelope sitting squarely in front of the single chair at the worn, but clean,

formica table. Seamus lay on a neatly made single bed in the far corner.

It was obvious that he'd been gone for a couple of days. The stench was unbelievable. Harry quickly took out his mobile phone and dialled the number for Bill Weasley.

"Bill, it's Harry. You need to come..." Harry swallowed. "It's Seamus Finnegan. Yes. Yes, we'll need them, but I don't want anyone else knowing about this until you've had a chance to assess it. Okay. Above Fortesques. Okay, thanks."

It was only a moment later when they heard footsteps on the stairs.

"Harry? Ron?" Bill entered the room, immediately taking a sharp breath at the smell. "Holy Merlin!"

Bill slowly assessed the room, the way Seamus was lying on the bed, the placement of the note, Seamus' wand lying against his chest, the mark there that showed what he had done. Bill took out his own wand and muttered something indistinct while moving it over the body. Seamus' wand glowed green for a moment.

Bill sighed. "He used the death curse."

"On himself?" Harry asked.

"It *is* possible," Bill said quietly.

"I know it's *possible*..." Harry said, obviously upset. "I just didn't... you're telling me he did this himself?"

"Yes, Harry," Bill confirmed quietly.

"You're absolutely certain?"

"Yes. I'm certain." Bill said. "He left a note?"

"Looks like it," Ron said quietly, holding his hand over the envelope on the table and looking questioningly up at his older brother.

"It's okay," Bill confirmed, nodding.

Ron picked it up and opened it, reading silently. Then, tears in his eyes, he held the letter out to Harry as he turned away.

Harry read it,

I figure Harry's going to find this. Or Ron. Maybe Neville, but I doubt it. Dean's gone, so it sure as bloody hell won't be him. It's more than likely Harry and Ron, together. You two are too damned predictable, you know?

So, if you be reading this, it means I've done as I intended. I can't do it again, lads. I can't stand in front of them, seeing them, fighting them, knowing what they did to my Lacey and my boys, and guarantee you I won't snap and just start flinging curses. I can't endanger anyone else through my anger.

It's better this way, anyhow. I want to be with my wife, and my sons. It just hurts too damned much to fight any longer.

I'd be asking you to keep it quiet. Toss me somewhere and let me rest. If you have the need, a drink raised to me occasionally is all that I want, as we've done many a time for Dean. My Lacey wouldn't approve, but that's as it should be.

S.

"Dear Merlin," Harry said quietly, handing the note to Bill.

After a moment, Bill looked up at him, "How do you want to handle this, then?"

"The ministry will have to know?"

"Suspicious wizard death," Bill nodded in confirmation. "I'm surprised that they didn't take note of the unforgivable being used and investigate immediately."

"They've got their own problems right now," Ron said quietly. "Call Dad, find out if we can... do as Seamus asked. Keep it quiet."

"I'll call a friend of mine..." Bill said. "He'll probably be able to file the necessary paperwork and let it go."

While Bill was on the phone, Harry and Ron were standing over Seamus.

"We'll do what we can, Harry," Ron said.

"We should have come sooner."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," Ron said. "It only takes a moment..."

"I should have known how he was feeling. I *did* know..."

"Harry, you can't be responsible for everyone else's choices," Ron said quietly. "We need you too badly right now for you to allow yourself to feel this way."

"Seamus..."

"Is gone, Harry. There is no going back from that. Let's just make damned sure that this bloody bastard who is causing all this trouble isn't allowed to do what he did to Seamus' family to someone else's. Right?"

Harry sighed, looking down at the body of the friend he'd known for twenty four years. "You're right, Ron."

"Of course I am," Ron smiled sadly. "Unfortunately, I'm right far too often for my own comfort."

Bill's friend from the ministry arrived, took Harry and Ron's statements, studied the body and cast a few spells over it. Within fifteen minutes of arriving, he was comfortable with declaring it a suicide, and filled out the appropriate paperwork.

"Can we...?" Harry left the question unasked.

"Arrange for burial? Of course," he fished in his pockets and came up with a card. "This is a service that will take care of all of the more... basic needs. Quietly."

"Thank you," Harry took the card, and shook the aging wizards' hand. "Thank you for your understanding."

"Young man, you and your friends are not unknown, or without respect. I know who that young man is. He deserved better than he got."

After dealing with the details of Seamus' burial, and hiring a firm to take care of the cleaning of the small room he had spent his last months in, the three made their way back to Potter Manor. Harry was surprised to see that only four hours had passed.

"Harry?" Ginny stood in the kitchen doorway, watching as the three apparated into the room.

"Gin," Harry smiled sadly, reaching out for her.

"Seamus?"

Harry didn't speak, just shook his head and buried his face in her hair.

"Ron?" She whispered, looking beseechingly at her brother over her husband's shoulder.

"He's gone, Gin." Ron said.

"Gone?"

"Gone. He used the death curse on himself."

"Dear Merlin," Ginny whispered, wrapping one arm tightly around Harry, and taking Ron's hand and pulling him into her embrace as well.

Arthur Weasley's prediction turned out to be true. Upon announcing his resignation, a call was put out for the nomination of candidates for

the post. It was a mere formality. Over the following seven days, they received many nominations. Every one was for the same person.

Three days later, Harry James Potter was sworn in as the youngest wizard ever to hold the position of Minister of Magic.

Okay, folks – I got some lovely reviews, and I want to thank you for them. You know, I was concerned when I originally posted this fic that I might end up getting some flames, but everyone's response has been so positive and supportive. You're all great – thank you!

Texasjeannette: *Wow – what a nice review! Thank you, thank you, thank you!*

Saerry Snape: *What a dichotomy you are, my dear. Love and War... Hey, that sounds like a cool title for a fic...*

azntgr01: *Thanks! I'm still trying to figure out what your name means...*

lalaluu: *Thanks – keep reading and keep reviewing (reviews make me feel nice!)*

Shotgunn: *Come ON, it HAD to be "Min". They can't be calling her "professor" for the rest of their lives, although Harry slips up occasionally. Besides, after the war, fighting beside someone, you simply can't keep up the formality – and I think she's marshmallow underneath. BTW – I like the name you chose... sounds rather Celtic, doesn't it?*

Merlindamage: *"Back on track"? Oh, I love you! Rest assured, there is more "war" stuff coming... hopefully Harry and the others will be ready for it.*

James Milamber: *Thank you so much! Your reviews are always inspiring to me, but this one takes the cake! To be thought of as anyone's favorite... you have no idea of the boost you just gave me, my friend!*

Larna Mandrea: *Thanks!*

CQ

Chapter Twenty: The Return of the Malferret

Harry closed the door to the bedroom behind him, leaving Ginny sleeping. He was up early, as he had agreed to meet with Ron and the others for a six-thirty breakfast downstairs before they all went off on their own agendas for the day.

Ginny had gone to bed early the night before. Seamus' death had affected her more than Harry had thought it would, and she'd been pale and listless for days. He certainly had no intention of waking her this morning when he was as capable as she in pulling breakfast together. She obviously needed her rest.

He was halfway down the stairs when he smelled coffee. It was just after six... apparently someone had beat him down this morning. Entering the kitchen, he found Molly sitting with her usual morning cup of tea. The coffee percolator brewing behind her on the kitchen counter.

"Good morning, Harry, love. How are you this morning?"

"I'm good, Molly. And you? Sleep okay?"

"Yes, love, yes. Arthur told me that you were going to be meeting early this morning for breakfast. Who all shall I be making for, then?"

"All of us... the Weasley's, anyhow," Harry poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. "And Hermione, of course. Thanks, Molly."

"No trouble, lad. I'll get it started then. The twins will be moaning the moment they arrive."

"Thanks, Molly. I didn't want to wake Ginny, but if I were cooking, they'd all be getting toast and marmite."

"And how is Ginny this morning?" Molly asked, her back to him as she opened cupboards.

"Asleep right now," Harry said, frowning. "I'm... she seems to have really taken Seamus' death hard. Harder than I expected her to, anyhow."

"He was a friend to her and Dean," Molly said quietly, laying bacon in a pan at the stove. "He stood for Dean and their wedding, love. Ginny's probably just... well."

"I know, Molly, but... it just seems like more than that, somehow."

"How so, love?"

"Well, she's listless, and pale, and tired all the time. She doesn't..." Harry flushed at what he had almost said. He certainly wasn't going to discuss *that* particular change in his new wife's behavior with her mother!

"Less than... attentive, lately, is she?" Molly smiled knowingly.

"Molly..." Harry's ears burned. Merlin, was he really having this conversation with his *mother-in-law*?

"And you can't think of any other reason she may be acting this way, Harry?" Molly continued, ignoring Harry's discomfort.

"Molly? Has something else happened?" He was suddenly worried. "Has someone said or done something to upset her?"

"Harry," Molly had finished with the bacon and left it sizzling, wiping her hands as she returned to the table to sit down across from him. "Let me tell you a story."

Harry, none too sure where this was leading, stayed silent. Which was generally a wise course of action when it came to Molly.

"When Arthur and I were first married, we were very much in love. We had a lot of fun, just being together. Those days were full of laughter and happiness. We did everything together, and were very active." She smiled, "You wouldn't know it now, of course, but we were very... physically active. Then, one day, Arthur came home from his job at

the Ministry, and found me sitting in a chair, looking out the window. I'd been there all day."

"Why?" Harry asked. Was Molly trying to tell him that some of her family suffered from depression? Was *that* what was wrong with Ginny?

"Seven and a half months later," Molly continued as though he hadn't interrupted. "Bill arrived."

It took Harry a minute, but then his eyes widened, and he went completely white.

"Molly? You mean...?"

"Harry, love, it's genetic. Every woman of the Prewitt line is listless and completely without energy for the first trimester. I was with every one of mine, and Ginny was with each of the girls."

"Molly?" Harry whispered. "Do you think it's possible?"

Molly laughed. "Harry love, you'd know that better than I. I'm just telling you what I see."

Harry sighed as Molly returned to the stove. Was it possible? Could Ginny be pregnant?

The Leaky Cauldron was quiet that night when Harry and Ginny apparated in about eight o'clock. Ron saw them and hailed from the corner table where he, Hermione, Neville and Luna sat. The twins were at the bar and Lee Jordan was making his way from them back towards Ron and the others. Lavender Brown and the Patil twins were sitting at the next table over.

As they made their way towards the table, Colin Creavey arrived through the floo.

"The gang's all here," Ginny smiled sadly. "Well, almost."

Harry squeezed her hand in his. "It's fitting, Gin. Seamus would have loved this."

Ginny nodded, and sat, as Harry pulled her chair out for her.

"Io, all!" she said.

"Ginny Weasley!" Lee Jordan grinned at her.

"That's Ginny Potter now, Jordan," Harry said gruffly, then greeted the other man with a grin. "How are you?"

"Great!" Lee said, sitting a pint in front of Harry. "First round's on me, mate."

"Thanks," Harry said absently, watching as Ginny pushed the pint Lee put in front of her away. "Ginny?"

"Just cola for me, please, Harry?"

"Okay, love." He stood and moved to the bar.

"Harry, lad!" George smiled, putting his arm around his brother in law's shoulders. "How the hell are you?"

"Great, George," Harry gave his order to the barman, eyeing his brother in law warily. "You?"

"Good, good..." George smiled. "I wanted to ask you..."

Harry looked at George, then Fred, and their identical grins, and groaned.

"Oh, what?" He asked, afraid he knew the answer.

"Now, lad..." Fred started.

"No," Harry said. "When you two get those looks..."

"What looks?" The twins said in unison.

"*Those* looks," Harry said, pointing at them.

"No, no, mate..." George said. "It's just, we've noticed Ginny-girl looking a bit green about the gills, and wondered if you're taking proper care of our little sister?"

Harry sighed, "She's fine, really."

"Marriage... to you... not agreeing with her, then?" Fred asked innocently.

"Look," Harry said in an undertone. "I'm not sure if... keep it to yourselves, okay?"

Fred and George exchanged grins.

"I knew it. I just *knew* it!" George said.

"What do you mean, you knew it?" Fred said. "I told you, you bloody git."

"Actually..."

"Told who what?" Hermione asked from behind them. Harry threw the twins dark looks before turning.

"Nothing, Mione... They're just arguing again. Guy stuff."

"Hmm," she pursed her lips, her eyes telling Harry that she knew full well he was lying through his teeth. "Ginny sent me to find out what was taking so long?"

Harry turned to see her cola sitting on the bar. He took it and turned back.

"And I'd like a pint," Hermione said, her eyes narrowing at the twins.

"Let me get that for you then, love," George said, stepping up to the bar.

"Thanks, Mione," Harry said, knowing that she would know he was thanking her for distracting the twins.

"You owe me, mister," she whispered. "Big."

"I know," he smiled as he stepped away, taking his wife her drink.

"Everything okay?" Ginny asked as he sat down next to her.

"Fine. The twins were just..."

"Being the twins," Ginny said dryly.

"As always," Harry agreed with a smile.

"Everyone, if I..." Neville began as Fred and George escorted Hermione back to her seat. Harry noticed Ron watching them closely. "If I could have your attention..."

"We're here..." Neville said, "to honor a friend. I... this is...I'm sorry..."

There were murmured agreements around the table. They were only in their thirties, and they'd lost too many friends.

"The five of us... Harry, Ron and I, and Seamus and... and Dean... we spent seven years as dorm mates. And... well... Seamus and Dean..." He glanced apologetically at Ginny, taking in her hand clasped in Harry's. He smiled sadly. "Well, I'll miss them both. To Seamus."

Harry glanced at Ginny. She had tears in her eyes.

"When Dean and I got married," she said quietly. "Seamus stood as witness. I never thought..."

"He's going to be missed," Ron said, raising his glass. "To Seamus."

"To Seamus," everyone responded, raising their glasses.

As they all drank in salute, George sighed, "That boy was death at Charms, but bloody hell, he was a genius at Transfiguration."

Fred nodded, smiling. "I wonder if McGonagall ever figured it out?"

"Figured what out?" Hermione asked. Fred and George turned to look at her.

"You mean, you didn't know?"

"Know what?" Hermione looked uncomfortable. She didn't like *not knowing*.

"Bloody hell, Hermione," Fred laughed. "You didn't think he smuggled in that firewhiskey, did you?"

"Or anything else, for that matter," laughed George. "He had a reputation for being able to lay his hands on just about anything, but more often than not, it was thanks to his transfiguration talents that he got it!"

"It took him two weeks to get me a French lace bustier once," Lavender smiled, remembering.

"More likely it took him a week and a half to figure out what the hell it was you were asking for and a day and a half to find something no one would miss and transfigure it!" laughed Fred.

"Bloody prat," Lavender smiled fondly. "He charged me fifty pounds for it!"

As they each shared their memories, Harry sighed. Seamus would have loved to be here, amongst his friends, one last time.

"Harry?" Ron looked across at him. "You okay?"

The group went silent, all looking at Harry.

"He stood beside me. In the final battle," Harry said quietly. "I don't know if I would have gotten to Voldemort if he'd not been there. I... I wasn't too comfortable with throwing unforgivables, and there were a lot of Death Eaters around us."

Silence.

"Ron was on one side... my left... about ten feet away, and he was dealing with Bellatrix Lestrange," Harry smiled sadly. "She almost had you, mate."

"Bloody bitch," Ron muttered. "Her and that goddamned Cruciatus..."

He glanced at Neville, then down into his mug. When he looked back, Neville raised his mug to him. Silently, Ron did the same. The two men held gazes for a minute, totally understanding the pain of the other, before turning their attention back to Harry.

“Well, Seamus was on my other side, cursing up a storm, and sending Death Eaters off... at an alarming rate. And then...” Harry smiled. “And then, he yells, 'Come on, Harry, let's finish up with this lot and go find a drink'.”

Everyone laughed.

“And then, the self-sacrificing mudblood jumped in to save you, and changed the world.” The voice came from the side. The group turned as one to see the tall, slim man standing there.

He was dressed completely in black. Hermione immediately thought of Snape, but then, a much more uncomfortable feeling washed over her. A mixture of burning anger and blind panic.

“Malfoy,” Ron stood. “This is a private party.”

“Really?” the blonde man smiled snidely. “And here I was thinking that this was a public establishment.”

Harry, Lee, Neville and the twins also stood. Ginny put her hand on Harry's arm.

“I suppose that this is a... memorial?” Malfoy sneered, looking down at the rough, stained tabletop and the pints sitting there. “Fitting, I suppose.”

“Malfoy,” Harry said in a dangerously quiet voice. “If you have something to say, I suggest you get to it. Otherwise, move along.”

“I just wanted to congratulate you, Potter,” he said in a saccharine tone. “The ministry, I'm sure, will benefit from your... leadership.”

“Thank you,” Harry's voice was steely. “Anything else?”

“Yes... I suppose now that Arthur Weasley is no longer the puppet...”

“Malfoy, I would suggest you get to it,” Ron said. “Otherwise you might be looking upon a return to Azkaban as something... desirable.”

Malfoy looked at Ron, his silver eyes piercing.

“Ah, yes, Weasley. Far be it from me to expect to have a conversation with your little... group... without it degenerating into threats of violence.”

He turned his pale eyes on Hermione.

“Miss Granger. So nice to see *you* again. It's been so very long.”

Hermione stood slowly. Instinctively, Fred and George leaned back, giving her a clearer path.

For a moment, she considered letting it go. Then, she remembered that night. The look of desperate lust for violence on Malfoy's face as he leveled his wand at Harry's back, the anger and frustration as he saw her jump in front of his spell, the glee as he realized that she would be much easier to control than Harry.

Her eyes narrowed, and she felt her wand in her hand.

“You're still a pissy little tyrant, I see,” she commented. “Playing with the big boys in Azkaban didn't improve your outlook much, did it?”

“Still as... biddable... as ever, mudblood?” he taunted.

Hermione sighed, for a moment, looking as though she would back down. Ron's eyes widened. He'd never seen Mione back down from Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked, and it was a mistake. An instant later, Hermione jerked her hand up. Focusing her narrowed eyes on the slim blonde man, she muttered the incantation.

“*Invidium mustela furo!*”

And, with a look of shock, Malfoy's face began transforming, into that of a ferret. Panicked, his hands moved to the furry cheeks, and he

started to curse. But all that came out was a series of high-pitched squeaks.

Hermione lowered her wand, smiling in a very self-satisfied way. "If you leave now, it might wear off in an hour or so. Otherwise, it might be permanent, Malferret."

There was total silence as a very obviously irate Malfoy huffed and hissed, then abruptly disappeared. All eyes turned to Hermione, who merely sat, smiled happily, and took a sip of her drink.

"Mione?" Harry grinned. "Where did you...?"

"I didn't even know that that was *possible*," said Ron in awe.

"Anything is possible, Ron," she said. "It just took a bit of research to find the proper incantation. He's just lucky I haven't found the bouncing charm yet."

"I can't believe you did that!" Fred whispered. "I can't believe *anyone* could do that!"

Hermione, sitting back in her chair and crossing her legs, grinned wickedly. "He was long overdue for that."

Three days later, Harry returned from a quick trip to Hogwarts to find Bill Weasley pacing in his office.

"Bill?"

"Harry," Bill sighed. "We've got to talk."

"What's wrong?"

"I've... Harry, I've been contacted by an old... associate. Another curse breaker..."

"Bill, slow down." Harry sat down in the wingback chair as Bill sat on the sofa across from him. "Now, what is going on?"

Bill sighed again, "This morning I got a letter, from Ledwin Murray..."

He stood and began pacing again. Harry ignored it.

"And just who is Ledwin Murray?" Harry asked.

"When I was working in Egypt, Murray was employed by Gringotts Saudi branch. He's... well, he's a curse breaker, but..."

"But?"

"Harry, he's a dark wizard. We never really got on very well, and I always suspected, but... we had to work together occasionally..."

"Bill?"

"He... he says that he has information, Harry. He's been working for Phillip Mahood. He knows about our connection, so he contacted me."

"Information?" Harry enquired.

"He wants to change sides."

Harry's eyebrows rose.

"But," Bill continued. "He'll only talk to you."

"Me?"

"He wants your personal assurance that..." Bill sat heavily. "He's been in the middle east for thirty years, but he's a British citizen. He wants your assurance that if he brings us this information, he won't end up in Azkaban."

"Which is where he belongs if he's had anything to do with this," Harry said, considering.

"Yes," Bill agreed. "But... Harry, what if he's really got something? Something that can help?"

"Do you trust him?" Harry asked, his green eyes piercing.

"Not as far as I can spit," Bill admitted. "But he's powerful enough to be within the inner circle. He's not a blow hard. If he says he's got information, he's got it. It's not that that I would be worrying about."

"What is it that you would be worrying about?"

"His motivation in changing sides."

"Double cross?" Harry asked.

"He's capable," Bill said. "He's slippery, a real piece of work, but I can't help..."

"Being tempted, I know," Harry nodded. "Well, it's not like we've got much to loose, Bill. Tell him I'll meet with him."

"Harry?" Bill looked down at him. "It could be a ruse."

"To get to me?"

"To get to you," Bill confirmed.

"I'll have to be on my guard, then, won't I?"

"Yes."

"If he does have information, Bill, we need it. Things aren't going as well as I would wish. If he doesn't..."

"If he doesn't, I'll kill the little bastard myself," Bill gritted.

"Arrange the meeting," said Harry. "In the meantime, I need to talk to Snape."

To each of my wonderful readers, I just wanted to say... thank you.

Larna Mandrea: *Suicide is rarely an easy thing to talk about, especially when you or someone you love has been touched by it. However, as Dumbledore said, fear of a name simply increases fear of the thing itself. We have to talk about suicide to make it something we can deal with and prevent.*

Saerry Snape: *I'm sorry to hear that your life, too, has been touched by this. As to how I ended the last chapter, who would want to run against The Boy Who Lived?*

Shotgunn: *Fantastic Beasts and Quidditch through the Ages are both in our library. A bit dog-eared now, but we wouldn't be without them.*

Azntgr01: *Now, it makes sense. I was born in the year of the rooster. I don't know if that is good or bad.*

Merlindamage: *Bad fluff taking over the world? Oh, no! Fluff writers unite! As for the suicide/magical world thing... it might be magical, but it's not perfect. And as the story suggests, perhaps the magical world is more like our own, more integrated with our own, than we think.*

Texasjeannette: *I'm glad that the story is that convincing! I only wish it were real...*

James Milamber: *Never inadequate, my friend. Keep that cricket bat handy, I might have a job for you later!*

Lalaluu: *Thanks – I always thought of Seamus as a rather under-utilized character. It might be my Irish background, but I like the thought of a completely irreverent Seamus.*

CQ

Chapter Twenty One: Joy Amidst the Sorrow

Ledwin Murray was not a tall man, but he was powerfully built. His dun-brown hair held streaks of grey at the temples, and he moved with the grace of a man who is as physically aware of his environment as it is possible to be.

Harry watched him enter the long room at the Ministry that he had arranged to use for this meeting. Harry didn't want this man anywhere near Potter Manor, he didn't want him anywhere near Ginny.

The man's black eyes assessed him shrewdly.

"You're not what I expected," he said shortly.

"Oh?" Harry said, unamused. "What did you expect?"

Murray was silent as he took a chair. "Minister..."

"'Harry' will do. 'Potter', if you have a problem with first names."

"Alright... Potter," the newcomer eyed him.

"Bill Weasley says you claim to have information that might be useful to us."

"Does he?" Murray smirked.

Harry looked at him through narrowed eyes, nodded, then stood. "You're wasting my time, Mr Murray."

"Wait," the man looked startled. "I do... have information."

"Mr Murray, I agreed to this meeting because Bill Weasley is a very old friend of mine, and he assured me that you weren't a bull shitter. If you have information, please, let's get to it. Otherwise, you are wasting my time, and I am a very busy man."

"Very well," Murray smiled. "You certainly aren't the person we... I expected."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"We were given to understand that you were... I think that the word used was 'poser'. That you thrive on attention, and were merely a... figurehead. That the Weasley family would continue to run things here in their rather... inept way..."

Harry sighed. Some things were beginning to make startling sense. "Is that all that Mr Malfoy had to say?"

Murray looked surprised, but only for a fraction of a second. That's all it took, though, for Harry to know that his assumption was correct.

"Look," Harry rubbed his hand over his face. "Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we?"

"Indeed, Potter."

"Malfoy is a git."

"Given," Murray said with a smile. "A git I would take great joy in strangling."

"Get in line," Harry said. "Do you or do you not want to ally yourself with our side?"

"Yes," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

"Fine. Here's how it works. You give me information. If that information is quality, and not three week old bull shit, I agree to give you limited sanctuary here in England."

"Limited sanctuary?"

"You get to stay here and I won't put you in Azkaban, so long as you keep your nose clean. One toe out of line, and Bill Weasley gets to kill you."

Murray smiled at the joke, the smile slowly fading as he realized that Harry was being perfectly serious. He swallowed.

"And who gets to decide whether the information I give you is any good or not?"

Harry placed his hands on the table and leaned down, intimidatingly, over the older man. "I do. This isn't employment negotiation, Murray, it's war. You approached us, so I'm assuming you have a pressing need to either be here, or to *not* be there. Therefore, I hold all the cards. Take it or leave it."

After a moment, during which Harry couldn't read a single emotion on the other man's face, Murray began to talk.

Philip Mahood was sixty two years old. His British citizenship was ensured by the fact of his British mother, but his true heritage, the one he chose to honor, came to him from his Saudi father.

He had served Tom Riddle, as his father had served Grindewald before him, as a trusted member of his inner circle. It was said by some that he was the first to step forward to take the Dark Mark. Others claimed that he was the only one of Voldemorts servants that the Dark Lord had trusted enough to *not* take the mark.

Mahood had served loyally throughout the years of Voldemort's rise. Strangely, when Voldemort disappeared after the attack on Lily and James Potter, so had Mahood. He had resurfaced for the final battle, then disappeared again. No one had any idea of where he'd been in the intervening seventeen years. It had been assumed by many that he had fallen in battle, unnoticed. But they knew, from Hermione's research, that he was back. Along with Langley Griffin, another whom had been assumed dead all along.

Ledwin Murray now told them something they hadn't known.

The three sects that Hermione had uncovered were merely covers. They made no attempt to hide their existence, but made it look as though they did. Their exposure allowed the muggle military to believe that the group as a whole was inexperienced and amateurish. When they didn't find any more as easily as these three, they assumed that that was it, and stopped looking.

They were wrong.

There were, in fact, four sects within England, two in London, one in Liverpool, and one in York. There were also two more in Scotland, and two in Ireland. Continental Europe had dozens.

The eight in Britain had a specific job to do. The three which had been 'exposed' were to cause trifling problems, stage the occasional attack, and avoid capture. They were a distraction. Minor enough to not allow a hint of the true scale, but major enough to keep the muggle and wizarding worlds believing that they were the extent of it.

The others were in the process of planning a major attack, involving all eight sects, in London, in a week. Ledwin Murray had times, and locations, and information on the strength of the attacks in each location.

"Murray," Harry regarded the man sitting across from him. "If this is accurate, you've saved a lot of lives."

"Don't fool yourself, Potter," the other man said coolly. "The only life I'm interested in saving is my own."

"Good." Harry said. "Then you won't mind staying here, nice and safe, as the guest of the Ministry until this information is verified, will you?"

"You said..." Ledwin Murray stood, pulling out a wand. Apparently a spare, as his wand had been checked in, as required of visitors, at the front desk when he arrived.

"What I said was I would keep you out of Azkaban. I have no intention of sending you there. However, until I verify the information you've given me, I can't make an informed judgment on whether or not you're leading us into a trap."

Harry observed the other man coolly without moving a muscle, as the dark wizard leveled his wand directly at him.

"I would suggest that you put that down, Murray, and stop acting like a... Malfoy."

"You will *not* keep me here!"

Harry sighed. Lifting his hand, he made a small gesture with two fingers, and the wand flew from Murray's hand to Harry's.

"Don't even think of toying with me," Harry said.

"How..." Murray's eyes were wide.

"It would appear that there was more than one thing that Mr Malfoy excluded from his... intelligence."

Murray swallowed, the first indication of real discomfort he had shown.

"You don't think I defeated Voldemort with pure luck, did you?"

Murray's eyes darted between his wand, now resting on the table in front of Harry, and Harry's eyes.

"Mr Murray, the problem with Malfoy... any Malfoy, but Draco in particular, is that in their arrogance, they refuse to credit others with any power at all. Anything that Draco Malfoy has told you, or told that pseudo-dark lord you've been working for, is colored by the hatred and jealousy that he's carried around for twenty five years. He has despised me since the moment we met."

Harry could see Murray's mind working.

"So, Mr Murray, if the intent was to feed me enough information to endanger *my* forces by leading them into well-orchestrated traps, then I'm afraid you've underestimated us. You *will* be staying here as our guest, until the information you've given us can be validated, or until it is of use to us. Afterwards, you and I will have a very long talk about what happens to double-crossers in the ranks of the Dark Lord. And trust me, that is exactly what he is going to believe you are within hours."

"How would you...?"

"I know, Murray, because I have Severus Snape, and he, I assure you, is an authority on the subject." Harry stood. "Now, you will be escorted to your apartment. The lodgings are really quite comfortable, but should you need anything, please ask."

"I would suggest," Harry moved towards the door, holding Murray's wand and moving easily, "that you make use of the writing materials in the room. I would strongly suggest you start documenting everything you know about Philip Mahood, his minions, and his plans. After I've dealt with this little problem in London, I'll be coming to speak to you and, depending on the outcome of the situation you've already outlined to me, and the quality of what you then have to offer, we'll be discussing how exactly you wish to be returned to our new Dark Lord, and how much you want him to know about our little... conversation."

Harry paused at the door to look back at Ledwin Murray.

"And Mr Murray, you are perfectly safe in the rooms we've set aside for you. However, I would avoid attempting any... hasty leave taking. The wards are quite extensive and any attempt to breach them would be very, very painful."

"Got a minute?" Ginny smiled from the doorway of his office to where he sat behind his huge desk.

"Of course," he pushed away some papers Bill had given him that afternoon. The transcripts from his conversation with Ledwin Murray.

"I..." Ginny came in and shut the doors, setting both privacy and quieting charms.

"Gin?" Harry stood. Now that he really looked at her, he could see the trepidation in her eyes... in her body language.

Ginny was scared.

"Harry... I..."

"God, Ginny, what is it?" He came around the desk to pull her into his arms.

"I went to see the doctor today."

“What?” Harry leaned back to look at her. He'd thought she might be pregnant, he thought that she might tell him soon, but...

But she looked so scared, and she'd been to see a doctor... was it possible it wasn't pregnancy? Was it possible she was *really* ill? Harry lost all color in his face.

“Ginny? Are you okay?” He led her to the sofa and sat her down, sitting on the coffee table in front of her and taking her hands. “I know you haven't been feeling well lately... I... Dear Merlin, Gin, you're going to be okay, aren't you?”

“Harry,” she placed her hands on either side of his head, forcing him to look into her eyes. “Harry, calm down. It's okay, I...”

Harry swallowed. Surely she wouldn't...

“I'm pregnant, Harry.”

It took a moment, but when it hit him, it didn't matter that he had suspected. All he felt was joy.

“Ginny? Really?”

“Really,” she confirmed, looking a little nervous. “I know it happened quickly...”

“Oh, Ginny!” Harry's hands came up, reaching forward hesitantly, then pulling her into his arms. “Oh, Gin! Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you...”

“Harry...?”

“You are... thank you,” he smiled, his happiness spilling out and over. “You... we're going to have a baby!”

“Yes,” Ginny confirmed, smiling, relieved, tears running down her cheeks.

“A baby!” Harry was still in awe, his arms tight around her. “Have you told your parents yet?”

"Of course not!" Ginny said. "No one knows but you and I, and the doctor, of course."

"Can we?" He asked. "Can we tell them, now?"

Ginny nodded, "Of course. I just wanted... I wanted you to know first, and I wasn't sure if you'd be pleased or not..."

"Pleased? Oh, dear Merlin, Gin! I couldn't be happier..." A thought occurred to him then, making him stop and look at her. What if...? "Ginny, *you're* okay with this, aren't you? I mean..."

"Oh, Harry, of *course* I'm okay with it! It's everything I ever wanted!"

The moment of doubt gone, he leaned forward, kissing her hard, then pulled back as he stood. Taking her hand, he pulled her to her feet and towards the door, disposing of her privacy charms with a wave of his hand as they exited, heading towards the kitchen.

"Molly! Arthur!" he called out as they entered.

"Harry? What is it?" Molly turned from the sink. Arthur looked up from his newspaper and tea at the table.

"Good, you're both here," Harry grinned down at Ginny. "You or me?"

Ginny smiled happily up at him, "Go ahead."

Harry, taking a deep breath turned back to Molly and Arthur and said, "Ginny and I..."

At that moment, there was a loud pop and Ron and Hermione apparated into the room.

"I wish you'd just stop it already!" Hermione grumbled. "I'm perfectly capable..."

"I just want to make sure. You haven't done this in a long time..."

"Ron!" Hermione spat, obviously frustrated as she pushed his arms away.

It was then that they became very aware of the four sets of eyes on them. Ron immediately went red. Hermione, if anything, looked more frustrated.

"What wonderful timing," Ginny laughed.

Ron glanced from Harry and Ginny to his parents and back. "What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Ron." Harry said. "I'm...we're glad you two showed up. We have news."

"News?" Hermione looked from Harry's face to Ginny's, assessing what kind of news it could be.

"What is it? What's happened?" Ron immediately went into 'auror' mode, his hand on his wand.

"Good news, Ron," Ginny said.

"Very good news," Harry confirmed, his arm tightening around his wife.

"No..." Hermione's eyes began to twinkle.

Ginny nodded.

"Molly, Arthur..." Harry took another breath. "Ron, Hermione... Ginny's pregnant. We're going to have a baby."

All hell broke loose. Molly screamed, and came running, throwing her arms around them, Arthur rose, loudly giving his congratulations. Hermione wasn't far behind Molly, throwing her arms around Harry and squeezing tightly as she squealed.

Ron stood, staring at Harry. "Bloody hell, really?"

"Really," Harry confirmed, grinning and spluttering through Hermione's wild hair.

"You're going to be a dad?" Ron sounded shocked.

"Looks like it," Harry said.

"When?" Ron asked. Harry stopped, the smile leaving his face.

"I... I don't..." he turned to look down at Ginny. "Ginny? When?"

Ginny's heart melted at the lost look on Harry's face. She knew he hated it when he felt he didn't know something important. "April, Harry."

Harry pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head, despite Molly and Hermione clinging to them, and shrugged over at his friend.

"April," he grinned.

Chapter Twenty Two: Preparations

"Harry, we need to go into the Ministry this morning," Ron said when Harry entered the kitchen the next morning. Ron was already sitting with his coffee, his empty breakfast plate next to him.

"Thanks, Molly," Harry said as she placed a cup of coffee and a plate of toast in front of him. "Why? What's up?"

"Don't know," Ron said. "I was just about to come up and get you. I just got a call from Bill. He wants us there as soon as we can get there."

Harry took a long drink of his coffee, then stood. "Molly? Ron and I have to get down to the Ministry. Do you think you could put my coffee in a thermos mug?"

"Of course, love," Molly said happily, bustling across to the table to take the mug from him.

"I'll just get my papers, and meet you back in here, if you're ready?"

"Yep," Ron confirmed, snatching a piece of Harry's toast as he stood. "Ready."

Harry raised his eyebrows at the theft, but was saved saying anything by Molly.

"Ronald Weasley! You've had your breakfast! Leave Harry's alone."

"Mum, he was *leaving* it! We have to get to the Ministry..."

"Don't you speak to me in that tone, young man!"

Harry grinned as he left the room. Molly never changed. For that matter, neither did Ron.

Two minutes later, he returned to the kitchen to find his coffee in a travel mug, and a packet of fresh toast wrapped in waxed paper sitting beside it. He picked it up and grinned wickedly at Ron's nasty expression as he sauntered over to his mother-in-law.

"G'bye, Molly," he said. "Tell Ginny where I've gone?"

"Of course, love," Molly smiled and blushed as he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

"And thank you for breakfast," he whispered.

"Go on with you, then!" she muttered, blushing again.

"Suck up," Ron muttered as Harry passed him on the way to the kitchen floo. "Brown noser, kiss ass..."

Harry tossed a handful of floo powder and firmly said, "Ministry of Magic!"

Arriving in the great hall of the Ministry building, he stepped out and away from the hearth just as Ron flooded in.

"... bloody prat," Ron continued.

"Watch it, " Harry grinned at him. "Or I won't share my toast."

"You do realize, don't you Harry, that now that you and Ginny are married and..." Ron dropped his voice, "... and now with this... she's going to consider her work with *you* done, don't you? And you do realize, Harry, exactly what she's going to turn her attention to next, *don't you, Harry?*"

"Why, Ron," Harry laughed, holding out a piece of his toast to him as they walked through the building to Harry's new office. "One would almost think she had you running scared."

"You're bloody well right I'm running scared!" Ron said. "With good bloody reason. You know what she was telling me before you walked in? Do you? Go on, just give it a guess!"

Harry raised eyebrows at his friend. "I'm sure that I couldn't begin to fathom, Ron, the workings of Molly's mind. Please, enlighten me."

"She was bloody telling me that neither Hermione or I were getting any younger!"

Harry snickered. Molly was nothing if not blatant in her subtlety.

“And?” he asked.

“And?” Ron's voice was deceptively quiet. “And? Does there *need* to be a bloody 'and', Potter?”

“Good morning, Minister,” the young witch behind the desk outside his office door smiled.

“Good morning, Ramona,” Harry said. “Bill Weasley...”

“Already inside, sir. Mr Charles Weasley is with him.”

“Oh,” Harry was surprised. “Thank you. Could you arrange some coffee?”

“Already done, sir. And an assortment of pastries as well. You'll find them on your credenza, sir.”

Harry looked at her, in awe. “Ramona, remind me of this when it's time for a raise, will you?”

“Yours or mine, sir?” she deadpanned. Harry laughed, shaking his head and heading into his office.

He sauntered into the largish room followed by Ron, who was still grumbling.

“Good morning Bill, Charlie.”

“What's put you in such a good mood this morning?” Charlie said through a mouthful of danish.

“Oh, I don't know...” Harry smiled, reaching for a muffin.

“The fact that you've managed to get our sister knocked up wouldn't have anything to do with it?” Ron grumbled, reaching for the pastry tray.

After surprised congratulations, Charlie turned his attention to his youngest brother. “So, what's your problem there, Ronnikins?”

"I..."

"He's just concerned," Harry laughed. "That now that Ginny and I are 'settled' that Molly is going to consider us... done, and be on the lookout for a new... project."

"Ah," Charlie said, nodding understandingly. "Running scared."

"You're blood right," Ron grumbled, mumbling something more that no one caught.

"What was that, Ronnie?" Bill said.

"I said, mind your own bloody business, unless you have a way to get that damned terrier who is our mother off my back about marriage!"

"Oh, that's easy," Harry said dismissively. The three Weasley men present turned disbelieving looks on him.

"Really?" Ron said sarcastically. "So, what's the solution, Sherlock?"

"Easy," Harry sat down at the long table. "Admit you're in love with Hermione, beg her to marry you, and produce a baby or two."

Ron began to choke on his pastry, and Charlie burst out laughing as Bill banged poor Ron on the back.

"Bloody hell, Harry! Don't be *saying* things like that!" Ron choked.

Harry shrugged, "Hey, it works. Bill, you wanted to see us? Ron said it was urgent."

"Well," Bill sat across from his still fuming brother. "We got a letter this morning."

"This morning?" Harry said, glancing at his watch. "It's quarter to eight, Bill. When, exactly did this letter come?"

"It was delivered by hand to the security guard on door duty."

"By whom?"

"They don't know," Bill admitted. "The guard in question was obliterated."

Harry and Ron glanced at each other.

"So, what does the letter say?"

"I don't know, Harry," Bill said quietly. "It's addressed to you."

Harry held out his hand and Bill produced a small envelope. Before handing it over, he said, "Harry, it's been checked for curses. I checked it myself..."

"So?"

"There is... well, there is some spell on it that I can't identify. And it's blocking whatever is inside."

"Blocking?"

"I can't tell if there is anything dangerous inside. I've never seen a blocking spell like this before."

"So?"

"So, I would suggest that you allow me to open it for you."

Harry's jaw clenched angrily at the suggestion. "Like hell, Bill. Give me the letter."

"Harry..."

"Bill, the day that I knowingly allow someone to put themselves in danger to protect me is the day I hand it all in, got it?"

"Yes," Bill agreed. "But let me have my wand out and ready."

Charlie and Ron both pulled out their wands, as well. Harry sighed and stuck his letter opener in the envelope to slit it open. They all tensed as a blue light played out of the opening.

"An identification charm," Bill said. "Making sure that it's you who opened it."

"And how could it tell?" Ron asked.

"Someone has gotten hold of a piece of Harry," Bill said matter-of-factly. "A hair, something. It would be required for that charm."

Harry opened the envelope and slid out a double thickness of very expensive stationary. Unfolding them, he saw a scrawling script.

Mr Potter,

If you are reading this then you did nothing silly like allow one of your minions to open the letter. If anyone but you had opened this, the scene would not have been nearly so pretty.

My name is Phillip Mahood. I know you know it... my Lord Voldemort was very impressed with your mental abilities, and the knack for getting into his mind and rooting about was one of your less endearing qualities, so far as he was concerned.

I am writing to you with an offer. I am aware, as my friend Mr Murray has not returned with his report, that we have been very unfortunately misled about your abilities. Rest assured that I shall not make that mistake again. I hope to please you with the news that Mr Malfoy has, as well, learned his lesson with regard to underestimating you.

My offer is this: join us, and the magical world and all who live in it, be they muggle, mudblood, wizard or squib, will live with nothing to fear from me. Join your power with mine, and we shall dominate the world, as we were meant to.

Should you choose to not take advantage of my generous offer, be aware of the consequences. There will be no mercy for those who do not bow to me.

I realize that your defeat of my Lord Voldemort may have given you some false belief that you can defeat me as easily. Rest assured, this is not a possibility, but even if it were, and even if you somehow managed to succeed in destroying me, you are intelligent enough to

realize that events have been put into motion in the muggle world that will not be easily stopped. If at all.

You cannot win, Harry Potter. Your choice is to join forces with me, or die. I give you until midnight to choose, and would ask that you send your answer with Ledwin Murray. Mr Murray and I have some unfinished business that I would like to take care of by tomorrow.

Sincerely,

PM

“Well, hell,” Charlie commented after Harry finished reading aloud.

“Harry?” Bill said, looking at the pale man beside him.

“Bill, I want you to bring Murray here.”

“Harry! You're not...?” Ron began.

“Don't be a prat, Ron,” Charlie spat, “Harry's not going to do anything stupid.”

“No, Ron,” Harry said quietly. “I'm not going to send him back. But Mr Murray doesn't know that. Charlie, I want McGonagall, Snape, Lupin, Hermione, the twins and your parents here within the hour. Ginny, too.”

Harry hadn't moved from where he sat. He stared at the wall, thinking, as Bill and Charlie got up to leave.

“Harry?”

Harry turned to see Ron watching him closely. “Relax, Ron. It's okay.”

“Harry, this isn't good.”

“No,” Harry laughed. “But it's a lot better than dealing with Voldemort. This one feels the need for retribution, Ron. He has a weakness.”

“Oh?”

"He wants Murray back."

"So?"

"So that tells me that Mr Murray knows more than Mahood wants told. His coming here was a ruse, just like Bill thought it might be. The information on the planned attacks was supposed to lure us into a trap. Now that that didn't work, Mahood is panicking. He expected us to let Murray go, he didn't expect us to suspect the information. He underestimated us."

"And?"

"And, I would not want to be a Malfoy right now," Harry said softly. "From what Murray said, they got their information from Draco... and you know how Voldemort rewarded ineptitude in the ranks."

Ron winced. He knew all right. Snape's accounts were colorful, to say the least.

"Damn," Harry muttered, reaching for his phone. "I need Luna here..."

Two minutes later, Luna Davis walked through the door into Harry's office. "You're lucky you caught me, Harry. I was just leaving the building."

"We have a situation, Luna." Briefly he filled her in. "I want you to sit back and observe, and act like a lawyer."

"Huh?" Luna looked at him, clearly confused.

"Just follow my lead," Harry said in an undertone as Bill led an obviously upset Ledwin Murray into the room.

"I demand...!"

"Mr Murray," Harry said in a firm voice. "My use for you is lessening by the minute. I would suggest you not give me any further reason to be rid of you."

"Potter! I demand you release me!"

“Very well, Mr Murray. But might I suggest that you listen first to the letter I received from your... employer... this morning?”

At that, Murray stilled. There was wariness in his eyes as they darted between Harry and the gorgeous blonde to his left.

“Letter?” Murray asked.

“Hmmm,” Harry confirmed. “The gist of it is that he's made me an offer, and wants an answer today. He wants me to release you into his... caring custody, and allow you to carry my answer to his generous offer with you.”

Murray choked, clearly distressed.

“I have no doubt he'll let you live long enough to get it out of you,” Harry said dryly.

Now he paled.

“I really don't see any other way to get the answer to him. Luna, what are the legal implications of handing Mr Murray over to Mr Mahood?”

“Well, that would depend, Harry,” Luna kept a straight face and Harry blessed her Ravenclaw background. “We don't really have any official record of Mr Murray being in our custody, so *technically* we wouldn't be responsible for handing him over to anyone...”

“You can't...”

“Is there any other way to get the response to Mr Mahood?”

“I don't know of any. The guard who the letter was delivered to is still in St Mungoes...”

The guard was in fact, Harry knew, laying on the couch at his home watching Fulham FC get their pants kicked by Liverpool. He'd check in with HR just before Luna arrived.

“It's unknown the extent of his injuries...”

“Yes...” Harry said, looking lost in thought.

"I... you can't send me back there! Not now!" Murray said, distraught.

"Well, Mr Murray, I'm sure as hell not going to risk one of my people to save your sorry ass..." Harry gritted, "Do you have a better suggestion?"

"Yes," If anything he looked even more upset than before.

"Oh?"

"I...I can tell you how to find him."

Harry smiled in a way that the women in his life would never recognize. "Please, do tell."

With a gulp, Murray spilled his guts.

Within the hour, Charlie had rounded up the people Harry wished to see and had them all in the larger meeting room off of Harry's office.

"What on earth is this all about, Potter?" Snape snapped at him as he strode through from the other room.

"Severus," Harry nodded. "Nothing much, I just felt like letting you know that we may have what we need to destroy Phillip Mahood. If you feel you have more pressing business elsewhere, please, feel free to leave."

Harry stood, staring down his old Potions professor who, occasionally, still required bringing down a notch or two.

"I apologize, Harry," Snape said. "I was in the middle of a rather... delicate... potion when Mr Weasley called."

"Apology accepted," Harry said. "I understand. But I would appreciate it if you would consider, in future, that I don't call emergency meetings for no reason."

"Harry," Minerva said from the other side of the table. "What is this all about?"

"A letter came from Phillip Mahood this morning, making an offer to us. He has offered safety to the magical world in exchange for our... allegiance."

Several snorts and gasps were heard.

"I intend to answer him in a way that leaves no doubt as to where we stand," Harry said in a steely voice. "Please, everyone, sit. By rights, as Minister, I can't ask this of any of you."

He sighed, sitting down. "The people around this table right now are the ones I trust implicitly. Each of you have proven yourselves again and again. Your actions have always been in the best interest of our world, and you've all shown unwavering loyalty to me. I find myself asking you now for... far more than I feel I have the right to ask for."

"Harry..." Lupin began.

"Please, Remus, let me finish," Harry said tiredly. "I know where he is, I know how to destroy him. I also know that there is no way he'll be lured to us. We *must* go to him. What I am asking for now is volunteers to go with me."

There were gasps and everyone seemed to speak at once.

"You are *not* going!" Ginny stood.

"Ginny, I have to," Harry said. "I don't think he's anywhere near as powerful as Voldemort, he's shown too many weaknesses. But I thought in the beginning that he was far more powerful. The truth is, I could be wrong. And I won't send Aurors into a situation like this. I've got the power to fight him that others may not."

Ginny stared hard at him, "Harry..."

"I have to, Ginny."

She sighed, "I know."

"I'm with you, Harry," Ron said from his left side.

Harry turned to his friend of so many years. "I knew you would be."

"Hey, can't split up the golden trio, now can we?" Hermione piped up, although Harry could see the tears in her eyes. "I'm with you, if you want me there."

"Are you sure, Mione?" Harry asked.

"Are you kidding?" she laughed with little humor. "Where else would I be but standing with you and Ron?"

"Count me in," Neville spoke up from the back of the room. "Mr Mahood and I have a score to settle."

Harry nodded his thanks. Despite the other mans obvious lack of enthusiasm for fighting, Harry couldn't remember a battle that Neville *hadn't* stood with him.

"Well, we can't mess this up, now can we? I'm in," Luna said dryly. "Looks rather like another team from a few years back, doesn't it, Harry?"

"Harry..." Ginny said, looking into his eyes, her own full of pain.

"Ginny, I want you to stay. The girls need you. Our..." He left the rest unsaid.

"Yes," she agreed, the look on her face telling him that she was torn.

"Well, I'm happy to take Ginny's place on the dream team," Charlie said.

"No, Mr Weasley," Snape's voice was cold. All eyes in the room turned to him.

"Excuse me?" Charlie said, turning to glare at the professor.

"I said, no. There are already far too many members of your family heading off on this little... mission."

"I don't see how..."

"I will go," Snape stated firmly.

Harry turned to look fully at him. "Severus?"

"I am an accomplished duelist, Potter. Besides, I am acquainted with Mr Mahood. We met during my time with Voldemort. It may be disconcerting for him to see me. It might give us a moment of advantage, the element of surprise."

Everyone in the room was silent, waiting for Harry's decision.

"Charlie, Bill... I need something from you two that you will be better able to do from here. Sev is right, with Ron and Hermione and I going, there is no reason to make your parents... and Ginny... worry any more than they already will.

"Sev, I would be glad of your assistance with this."

Snape nodded.

"I have the information on where Mahood will be for the next two weeks. I would suggest that we all take a couple of days to prepare. I would like to speak to each of you individually, but for now, I suggest that we prepare ourselves to go Dark Lord hunting."

"For Merlin's sake, Ron, I'm perfectly capable of doing this on my own!" Hermione said as they apparated with a pop into the kitchen of Potter Manor. "When are you going to let me do it on my own?"

"When I'm sure you won't splinch yourself," Ron snapped back. It was then that he noticed Ginny watching them, amused, from where she stood leaning against the kitchen counter. "Ginny."

"Ron," Ginny greeted gleefully.

"I... I have to talk to Harry," Ron said.

"In the den," she grinned saucily.

"Ginny...?" Ron appeared hesitant to leave the room.

"Yes?"

"I... nothing, just..."

"Harry's in the den, Ron."

"Yeah," Ron swallowed, leaving the room with a glance over his shoulder.

"By all that is holy, Ginny, I swear I could kill him!" Hermione huffed.

"Oh? Why is that?" Ginny turned amused eyes back on her friend.

"He won't let me apparate alone! He says that I'm not ready and might splinch myself. He's got to hold my hand, or stand with his arms around me..."

"And you hate that," Ginny observed dryly.

"I don't *hate* it," Hermione blushed.

"Oh?"

"He's... oh, Ginny, he's just so frustrating I could *scream*!"

"Hmmm," Ginny nodded understandingly. "You hate having him touch you and he makes you want to scream. I'd suggest you just stay well away from him, Hermione."

"I can't..." Hermione realized what she was about to say, and wisely shut her mouth.

"I mean, you two are constantly bickering. It's obvious you can't stand each other."

"I... I can stand Ron, Ginny," Hermione said softly.

"Oh?" Ginny said, sitting down and indicating that Hermione ought to do the same. "Just how *do* you feel about my brother, Hermione?"

Hermione sighed and pulled out the chair across from the redhead. "I just... he's just so bloody *annoying*. Sometimes I just want to slap him, but..."

"But?" Ginny inquired.

"But other times, I just want to kiss him senseless," she muttered, dropping her head onto her folded arms on the tabletop with a groan.

"Well, I don't see the problem, then," Ginny stated. "As that feeling seems to be mutual."

"What?"

"The kissing senseless bit. Ron's nuts about you."

"He is *not*!"

"Oh, he certainly is! Why else would he insist on putting his arms around you every single time you apparate?"

"That's just so I don't splinch myself," Hermione said dismissively.

"Really?" Ginny smiled wickedly. "That's funny."

"Why?" Hermione looked at her, puzzled by Ginny's response.

"Because, Hermione, there is no such thing as splinching. You can either apparate, or you can't."

"You can't let her go, Harry!" Ron paced in front of Harry's desk.

"Ron, I can't forbid her to go, she's one of us. Would you let me forbid *you* from going?"

"Hell, no, but..."

"Hell, no, nothing. She's one of us, and she's responsible for making her own decisions."

"Ginny is one of us, too, but you told her to stay!"

"Ginny is my wife, Ron. She's carrying our child, she has our children to consider. Hell, I have to consider them, Ron. Ginny is needed more here."

"So you're just going to let Hermione go, then?"

"Unless she's pregnant by Thursday, yeah, I am."

"I..." Ron spluttered., turning red to the roots of his very red hair.

"Is she pregnant, Ron?"

"I... I wouldn't know."

"Ah, well, you'd better find out, then." Harry said lightly.

"She's not ready for this, Harry."

"She was top witch in our year, Ron. She's the smartest woman I know. She's not going to walk into this blind."

"She still hasn't remembered enough!"

"Like the fact that there is no such thing as splinching yourself?" Harry asked, amused.

Ron turned an even deeper shade of red. Harry wondered absently if it was possible for someone to blush so hard they passed out from lack of oxygen to the brain.

"Ron, if you have things to say to Mione, I would suggest that you get them said. They're doing neither of you any good going unsaid. And I dearly wish I could forbid Mione from going, but I am absolutely certain she'd hex me into next week if I tried."

"She's not ready," Ron asserted. "She's not strong enough yet."

"She might just surprise you, Ron."

"Harry..."

“Ron, she faced down a Dementor and a Death Eater alone and kicked butt on *instinct* before she even knew who she really was. My money is on her.”

“Harry,” Ron said quietly. “I love her.”

“Then tell her that.”

“I can't,” Ron said miserably.

“Why not?”

“I... Harry, we don't exactly live safe, normal lives, you know?”

“So?”

“I can't endanger her.”

“She's part of this, Ron. She's already in danger.”

“What if I tell her, get her to stay here, and then I don't come back? What then?”

“Then, at least she knew you loved her,” Harry shrugged.

“But...”

“Look, Ron,” Harry laughed. “You're talking to the wrong guy if you want me to say you shouldn't say anything. Look at me. I pushed Ginny away for her own safety and lost her for eighteen years. I have to live with that for the rest of my life. I have to look at her children, whom I love with my entire soul, and know that another man fathered them because I was an idiot. Don't do it to yourself, Ron. The two of you have lost too much time already. Don't lose more if you can do something about it.”

“What if...” Ron said quietly. “What if she doesn't feel the same way?”

“I don't think that there is much danger of that, mate. However, if that's the way it works out, then at least you know.”

Ron sighed, looking out the window. "I'm thirty five years old, Harry. Why do I still feel like the sixteen year old who couldn't get up the courage to ask her to the Yule Ball? Why is this still so hard?"

"Because you love her," Harry said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "If you didn't give a rat's ass about her, if she was just another of the many, many women you've... enjoyed... over the years, it would be easy."

"Not that many," Ron denied with a hesitant smile.

Harry snorted, "Compared to me, mate? Yours was a regular shag-fest."

"There was plenty of opportunity presenting itself to you, oh great Voldie-slayer, as I remember it."

Harry smiled ruefully, a little sadly. "They weren't Ginny, Ron."

"Ewww! No," Ron shook his head as though trying to clear his mind. "No, no, no! Harry, do *not* speak of shagging and my sister in the same breath..."

Harry laughed.

"God, Harry, that's a mental image I just *do not* want, okay?"

"She's..."

"*Don't!*"

"Okay, Ron, so long as you agree to never, ever, talk to me about Hermione's... talents. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Ron said, blushing when he realized what he'd just said. "Harry?"

"What?"

"How am I going to do this?"

"I would suggest the direct approach, Ron," Harry responded dryly. "Less room for misunderstanding and you two need all the help you can get."

"What do I do if Ginny is there?"

"Kick her out?" Harry grinned.

"Well," Ron stood. "I guess there's no time like the present."

He gulped nervously as he walked out of Harry's den and down the hall towards the kitchen.

"Hermione, I want to tell you..."

"No," he muttered to himself. "No, no, no!"

What on earth was he thinking? You didn't just walk up to a woman and tell her you loved her. In Ron's experience, that would be a sure-fire way to get your face slapped. Women liked you to work up to things.

This required some working up to. Dinner, dancing, maybe a film or theatre tickets... candlelight.

Time.

But time was something they didn't have. He could be dead by Friday. And he refused to face death with this still unsaid between them.

Stiffening with resolve, he pushed the kitchen door open and strode in, to find his sister and Hermione sitting at the table, staring at him with rather... guilty?... looks on their faces.

"Ron?" Ginny said hesitantly when she saw his expression. "You okay?"

"Ginny, you're my sister and I love you..."

"Thanks, Ron." Ginny looked confused.

"Now get out," his eyes never left Hermione's face, so he missed the look that Ginny shot him. Surprised, she stood and with a last glance at Hermione, left the room.

"Ron?" Hermione watched him, looking concerned.

"Hermione, I have some things I need to say to you, and I'd appreciate it if you just let me talk and didn't interrupt because if you do I'll probably never be able to say it.

Hermione was stuck between wanting to lamb-baste him for presuming to tell her what to do and curiosity about what it was he wanted to say.

"Okay," she said slowly, reserving judgment.

"Eighteen years ago, you were my best friend. Before the final battle, I wanted to say some things to you, and I didn't. I've... I've been relieved over the years that I didn't get to say those things, because if I had, and you had said them back, I'd never have rested until I found you.

"When you came back, it was easy to put those things aside, because you didn't *look* like my Hermione. For a while, I actually believed that my feelings had changed. But the more I got to know Maura, the more I recognized you in her. When Harry changed you back, I really... it really hit me that you *were* Hermione. I guess, until I saw you as you are now, I didn't want to believe it. Since then, I've realized that things have never really changed for me.

"We're facing something Thursday that... well... I don't want to face without finally telling you..."

"Tell me what, Ron?" Hermione asked quietly.

"That I love you. That I've always loved you, that... I fell in love with you when I was eleven years old and you told me I had a dirty face, and since then, it's only grown stronger."

"I love you, too, Ron," she smiled gently.

"No, Hermione... I mean, I love you like... like Harry loves Ginny, like Bill loves Janie. Like my Dad loves my Mum."

Hermione stood and walked over to him, placing her hand on his chest right above his heart.

"Ronald Weasley, I love you. I love you like Ginny loves Harry. I love you like Janie loves Bill. I love you like your Mum loves your Dad. Only more."

"You do?"

"Of course I do," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "How could I not love you? My Gryffindor lion."

Ron pulled her close, wrapping his arms tightly around her, "Mione..."

"But we are going to have a discussion about splinching," she whispered into his ear before kissing him senseless.

Okay, okay, I know. REALLY long. I guess I should have cut it into two, but this is how it was written, folks!

James Milamber: *As always, my dear, you've got me rolling here. Just the kind of laugh I needed today, too – I thank you. Tell Jonas and Milamber they can seek refuge over here if necessary, and that their comments, too, were appreciated!*

Merlindamage: *Well, I wouldn't say "monster"... but we'll see.*

Shotgunn: *Well, we'll see about that due date! As for the R/H thing... was that good enough for you?*

Azntgr01: *Well, I'm supposed to be a bit tenacious... but self-involved, too. I don't know if that is a good thing or not. Hmmm. No, to the early riser thing... well, not by choice, anyhow! Do NOT be sad, I'm already contemplating a prequel... or a sequel!*

Larna Mandrea: *I raise my glass to you! Thanks again for your encouragement!*

Saerry Snape: *Malferret... you've got to have the ferret reference in ANY HP fic involving Draco. Come ON!*

Chapter Twenty Three: The Extermination of Phillip Mahood

"Harry, you know that I respect your judgment," Charlie said as Harry led he and Bill into his den. They had all three just returned from the Ministry, and Charlie was still upset. "But I'm telling you now, you'd better have a damned good reason for telling me to stay here and taking that git Snape with you."

Harry smiled, "That 'git' has more experience in outwitting Dark Wizards than the three of us put together.

The three men sat, Harry in his leather wingback facing Charlie on the sofa, and Bill in the other armchair.

"Well?" Bill said. "What do you have for us, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath, then looked each of his brothers-in-law in the eye in turn.

Bill Weasley was forty five years old. His early years as a curse-breaker had added depth to his generally easy-going manner. He was as dependable as anyone Harry had ever known.

At forty-three, Charlie, with his auror experience and frequent run-ins with creatures far more powerful than your average wizard, was the more aggressive and more protective of the two.

"Charlie, the reason I wanted you to stay is that I need to know that I can leave without worrying about Ginny and the girls... or the baby. I can't fight if I'm concerned about what will happen to them... and Molly and Arthur... if I fall."

"Harry..."

"Charlie, despite what I said earlier, I don't know how powerful he is. Right now, I have no idea."

Bill and Charlie glanced at each other, then back to Harry.

"I need you to stay here, Charlie, and look after my family if I don't come back."

“Harry, you know that we would...”

“Bill, I know that Ginny and the girls would be taken care of, but Ginny *listens* to Charlie. He's the only one she *will* listen to at times,” Harry turned back to the younger of the two. “I can do my job far more effectively if I know that you're here looking out for them. If you're here for her. Please?”

Charlie nodded, “Of course, Harry.”

“Harry,” Bill shifted in his seat. “You know that we Weasley's stick together...”

“I have no doubt of it, Bill. And I know that you'll be there for Ginny too, if things go to hell.”

“Of course I will.”

“But I have something else I need from you, and I'm not certain it's going to leave you a whole lot of spare time.”

Bill raised an eyebrow questioningly, “What?”

“I'd like you to accept the role of Deputy Minister.”

For once in his life, Harry witnessed two Weasleys speechless at the same time. Charlie recovered first.

“Excellent choice, Mr Potter,” he said quietly, smiling.

“I don't know what to say,” Bill replied weakly. “Harry, are you sure?”

“Without question,” Harry confirmed. “Bill, you're always the voice of reason, even when we're all haring off on tangents. Besides, you're a curse breaker. As Minister, I'll probably need to call on those talents from time to time. Not *everyone* will agree with my policies, I'm sure.”

Bill smiled. Charlie laughed outright.

“Do you accept?” Harry asked.

“I assumed that Ron...”

“Ron is always at my side. He's my best friend, but he's not politician material. He and I have discussed that, and he wholeheartedly agrees with me.”

“You talked to him about him taking the post?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Harry leaned back in his chair. “I talked to him about why I wouldn't be offering it to him. He seemed surprised that I might have considered it. He is in total agreement with my choice. Bill?”

“I...” Bill took a deep breath. “I'd be honored, Harry. Thank you.”

“No thanks necessary,” Harry said, standing and moving towards his desk. He rifled through some papers there and came up with a red folder and a quill. “Charlie, could you call Hermione in here?”

Charlie looked at him questioningly.

“We need a witness to this whose last name *isn't* Weasley,” Harry explained.

Ten minutes later, the appointment was signed by Harry, Bill, Charlie and Hermione, and was official. Should anything happen to Harry Potter during his term of office as Minister of Magic, Bill Weasley would stand as Minister in his stead.

“You can't go!” Ron said, sounding like a little boy begging for a new toy.

“Give me one good reason why not,” Hermione said, pulling on a form fitting black knit sweater over the charmed body-suit. Ginny had provided it earlier, telling her it would give a bit of protection against curses that hit her torso, but warning her that it wouldn't block the unforgivables.

“Because...” Ron swallowed. “Because I love you.”

“I love you, too, Ron,” she sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled on her heavy-soled boots. “But that's not stopping you from going.”

“But...”

“Look,” she stood, looking at him where he stood in the doorway of her room. “Harry needs us, Ron.”

“But...”

“But, what?”

“Last time...”

Hermione stilled, suddenly feeling very, very cold. “Is that what this is about, Ron? The final battle? What I did? Is the real problem that you don't *trust* me to stand next to you?”

Ron looked shocked, “Of course not!”

“Then what?”

“I was going to say that last time, you damned near died! That I lost you for seventeen years and I can't do that again!”

Hermione stared at him for a moment, then took a deep breath.

“Then you know why I can't stay here and watch you go, Ron. I lost those years, too, and I refuse to lose one more minute with you. If one of us falls, then at least we'll have been together to the very end.”

Ron thought for a moment, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Mione,” he said thickly. “What will I do if something happens to you?”

“You'll go on, you'll live, you'll be there for the others. Just as I will if something happens to you. You'll be different for having known me, but not less than you are right now. Just as I would be.”

Ron ran a hand through his Weasley-red hair. “Why does it have to be so confusing? So hard?”

Hermione smiled, “We weren't born for boring lives, Ron. We were born into these lives. The day that the three of us met, stuff shifted around, fates were cast. For you and I, the fact remains that our fate,

our destiny, is linked to Harry's. We enjoy his friendship, we love him like a brother, and all that that gives us. But in return, our lives will never be 'normal'."

"So, where do we go from here, then?" Ron asked absently.

"Well, as I remember it," Hermione moved towards him. "You're on his left, and I'm on his right, and we walk in together, our wands at the ready to face whatever is waiting for us."

Ron smiled, his smile turning slowly into a grin. "All for one and one for all?"

Hermione laughed up at him, "Forever."

With a nod, he held out his hand to her. Taking it firmly, she allowed him to lead her from the room.

Time to go hunting.

Harry and Ginny were in his office. He held her tightly, not really wanting to let go, but knowing he had to.

"I love you," he said into her strawberry-scented hair.

"I know," she said, a slight hitch in her voice the only indication that she wasn't entirely okay with the situation. "Please be careful."

"As careful as I can be," he promised. "Tell my girls..."

Her brown eyes searched his green ones at his hesitation. She smiled, understanding.

"I will," she said simply. "Every day."

As they exited the den, they found the others waiting in the hall. Neville, his childhood puppy fat turned to hard muscle over years of physical conditioning, stood quietly at the foot of the stairs, his body clothed in black jeans and sweater, his cloak pushed behind him out of his way. He stared silently at the floor.

Luna was dressed similarly. Dark clothing to hide them against the night, her bright hair knotted at the back of her head and covered with a black knit scullcap.

Ron and Hermione were coming down the stairs, holding hands. Ron looked resigned, Hermione looked determined. Harry didn't want to know what had put those looks on their faces, but he imagined the conversation had been colorful.

Snape stood, his long black robes billowing around him. He stared blankly at a small painting on the wall, obviously lost in his own thoughts.

And there were two others dressed in black. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks stood together near the door, obviously prepared to go with them.

"Shack? Tonks?" Harry stopped, looking at them. "What are you doing here?"

"Come on, Harry." Kingsley said. "Six of you and only two of you are trained aurors?"

"Three," Hermione said indignantly.

"Forgive me, Miss Granger, but given your... sabbatical... from the magical world, you'll forgive me for not counting you." Kingsley turned back to look at Harry steadily. "You need us, Harry."

"How the hell did you even find out...?" Harry was severely pissed off. Someone had talked, someone he trusted...

"I told them," Snape spoke suddenly.

"You?" Harry turned on him.

"Yes, me. You can deal with me later, Minister. Right now, I believe we have an Order mission to complete."

Harry's eyes narrowed, "We will talk later, Sev."

"Let us hope so, Harry." Snape nodded.

"I want each of you to wear one of these," Ginny stepped forward, picking up a small bag that was sitting on the floor next to the staircase. Out of it, she took a handful of wristbands that looked suspiciously like watches. "Should you be... injured... in danger of death, these will pull you back here."

"How the hell...?" Ron began, accepting one of the devices from his sister.

"They monitor your life signs. If you go into distress, they activate. You'll be transported directly to a room upstairs where we'll be waiting. Mum's got it set up with everything we'll need to help. If necessary, one of us will be able to apparate you to the hospital, if you should... need to be taken there."

"Thanks, Ginny," Luna smiled as she helped Neville put his on.

"Please, be careful," Ginny spoke to them all, but her eyes were locked with Harry's.

"We will," he said, pulling her close and kissing her one last time. He placed his hand on her belly, low, and pressed gently while looking down into her tear-filled eyes. "You take care."

She nodded, then stepped away, to be pulled close between Charlie and Amelia. Molly and Arthur, Bill and Janie were also there, watching the group prepare.

Harry locked eyes with Charlie for a moment. His eyes were bleak, questioning. Charlie nodded, once, tightening his arm around Ginny. Harry breathed in and nodded in response, turning away.

So it was a party of eight, rather than six, that left Potter Manor that night, wands at the ready.

They apparated into a small treed area close to where they knew Mahood was staying. Harry had had the area under surveillance for a couple of days. All evidence pointed to Ledwin Murray being correct

in his assertion that this was where the Dark Lord had taken up residence to be on hand for the upcoming activities in England.

“Ow...” came a whispered curse. “Bloody hell!”

“Ron?” Harry's voice was barely heard.

“Goddammit! Bloody rabbits...”

A snicker was heard. Harry thought it might be Tonks.

“Status?” Harry said quietly. Each of the party members sounded off. Everyone was accounted for.

“Ron?”

“I'm fine, Harry. Apparated with one foot in a bloody rabbit hole.”

“You're okay?”

“Yes.”

“Good then, let's go, and keep it *silent*.”

At the edge of the trees, Harry held up one hand to signal a stop. Instantly, every member of the party froze. In the distance, in the darkness, Harry could see the dark outline of a house.

“Sev?”

He heard Snape murmuring under his breath. The outline of the house flashed pale blue for an instant.

“Warded,” Snape spoke low. “But...”

“What?”

“Very weakly.”

“Anything else?” Harry asked suspiciously.

"I can't tell," Snape admitted. "But it seems rather convenient that they're using such juvenile wards. Any decent fourth year student would be able to break through these."

"Then there is something else," Harry said. "Dammit, I'm going to draw and quarter Murray when I get hold of him."

"Harry?" Neville's whispered voice came hesitantly.

"Nev?"

"There's... do you smell that?"

Harry sniffed, "It smells like... road tar?"

"Yes," Neville whispered. "I think it's *Malocia viticalis*..."

"What in the hell is that?" Ron hissed, obviously impatient to get moving.

"It's a plant," Neville said. "Very small, grows to about four inches high..."

"Neville, get to the point," Luna said kindly.

"Well, it's highly toxic, and it's not native to Britain."

"So?"

"So, for the scent to be this obvious, there has to be a lot of it around... and it's not a native plant, so it's been planted intentionally..."

"How toxic, Nev?" Harry asked, fearing the answer.

"If it touches exposed skin, *any* exposed skin," Neville whispered. "Two minutes."

"Fuck!" Harry muttered. "What's it look like?"

"Four inches high, elongated, silver-green leaf... spreading... kind of looks like moss, but thicker and... deeper."

"Is there *anyone* here with exposed skin below the waist?" Harry asked. Luckily, everyone had dressed in pants tucked into heavy boots under their robes, all wore gloves and long sleeved sweaters, and no one had any exposed skin below their necks.

"Not a bad defense," Harry muttered angrily. "Watch for trip wires. If you do feel yourself going down, brace with your hands and keep your face high."

As their eyes had adjusted to the dark, they had begun to be able to pick out details around them. Harry had intentionally chosen a moonless night, all the better to conceal them, but it had the downside of there being no discernible light for them to see by.

"And Neville?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Good job, mate."

There was no response. Harry knew Neville, and knew full well that the other man didn't accept praise well. He didn't press it.

"Okay, forward."

The five wizards and three witches moved forward as one.

Hermione walked with Harry to her left and Luna to her right. They had maintained a ten foot spread, and no talking was possible, but she could feel the others in the darkness around her.

The wristband Ginny had given her itched, but she didn't dare touch it. With her luck, she'd end up transporting herself back to the Manor without meaning to.

That would freak Ron out.

Ron. What on earth had he been thinking, telling her he didn't want her to come along? Stupid man. Like she'd be anywhere but beside him through something like this.

She felt a shiver of apprehension. She was on edge, adrenaline coursing through her blood-stream. She wanted to be anywhere *but* here, but she knew that this was what she had been born for. So long as the magical world faced war, she and Ron and Harry would stand, should to shoulder, against it.

And Ron loved her...

She suddenly felt very, very cold. "Harry?"

"I feel it," he whispered back. "Dementors."

"Where?" Ron hissed.

"They must be inside," Snape said.

In that instant, the world exploded. The dark, cold shapes of Dementors appeared seemingly from nowhere. There were at least a dozen, but Hermione thought, in the darkness, there must be many, many more.

As one, it seemed, Patronus exploded from wand ends. An eagle, an owl, a weasel, a stag, a bear, a wolverine, a python, and a cougar. All charged into the darkness, the shrieks heard heightening as the group formed, almost without thought, into a large circle, each with their back to the group, facing out.

A few of the Dementors survived the initial onslaught of familiars, but they didn't survive the second. After less than three minutes, they were gone.

But now the group had larger problems...

The screams of the Dementors and the yelling of incantations had drawn attention from the house.

"We're too damned exposed!" Ron yelled.

As they scrambled for the cover of the few trees and bushes, forms erupted from the house. More and more came. Dozens.

"How many of the bloody bastards are there in there?" Ron asked. Harry, crouched behind a boulder to Ron's right, grinned.

"How many Death Eaters does it take to change a lightbulb?" he chuckled.

"Harry, you've lost it."

"Not yet, my friend. Ready?"

"Never," Ron muttered, standing and shooting curses at anything that moved while Harry to his right, did the same.

Kingsley and Tonks, teaming the way Harry and Ron had, managed to take out at least two dozen before, with a shocked cry, Tonks fell to her knees before suddenly disappearing.

"Dammit!" Kingsley screamed, standing and shooting off curse after curse.

"Well, now we know how that works," Ron yelled.

Hermione, in shock from watching Tonks disappear, followed Kingsley's lead and let instinct take over. Soon, she was dropping as many of the Death Eaters as Harry.

Neville and Luna, fighting as a team back to back, were suddenly enveloped in a yellow light. As their bodies went limp, they both disappeared. Hermione swallowed, glanced over at Harry and Ron, and kept fighting.

Kingsley was the next to fall. Red light from three different directions hit him square in the chest simultaneously. His face went slack, he gave a strange gurgling cry, but before he fell to the ground, his body disappeared.

Now Harry stood, Ron to his left, Hermione and Snape to his right. Without pausing, he let fly several debilitating curses into the darkness. Three separate cries broke the strange quiet of the moor. Three had found their targets.

The silence broke through their adrenaline-induced high... each of them realizing that no more dark wizards stood around them.

"Mr Potter..." a voice came through the darkness as a form emerged. "How nice of you to finally show up."

"Mahood," Snape spat.

"Ah, yes," the dark man looked over. "Severus Snape. I never thought I'd have the pleasure..."

Snape raised his wand, but was too late. Mahood muttered the incantation before any of them could move.

"...of being the one to kill you," he finished. Hermione was dully aware of Snape disappearing from her side as he fell.

"Now, Mr Potter..." he stepped forward. "We have, I believe, unfinished business."

"Oh, yes. We do," Harry gritted between clenched teeth.

"I was undecided as to how I would handle this," Mahood spoke lightly. "I thought, will I kill him first, and make his loyal friends watch? Or will I kill them, and let him know that their deaths could have been avoided, if only..."

"*Expell...*" Hermione screamed, but never finished. The green glow from Mahood's wand enveloped her, and she fell.

Ron screamed, rushing the figure in his rage. He didn't go three steps before he, too, disappeared in green light.

"Well," Mahood smiled coldly. "Your friends appear to have decided for me, Mr Potter."

Harry intentionally left his wand down at his side, but under his breath he murmured an incantation. A very old, very powerful incantation.

"So, Mr Potter, tell me, have you decided?"

Harry continued to mutter.

"Mr Potter?" The older man stepped forward, wondering why Harry Potter was not responding.

"... *leviticus manum*..." Harry continued to mutter.

Phillip Mahood's eyes went wide. "But you're... that's... *avada kedavra*!"

"...*avada manum*!" Harry screamed the last, a fraction of a second before the green light from Mahood's wand hit him in the chest.

And Harry Potter fell into the welcoming blackness.

Ah, my readers. I know, you're probably all cursing me plenty right now. But you know it had to come.

Kristen: *Smuttiness? Hmmm...*

James Milamber: *What can I say? You're a great writer, my friend. Bring on the next chapter, and when Mind Mage is complete we'll have an intervention for you to get you off the sugar and coffee... Jonas can lead us.*

Shotgunn: *What are you saying? They kicked butt against West Brom yesterday...and Manchester... well, what exactly was that with Bolton, a game? Please. Liverpool rules.*

Merlindamage: *Death and dismemberment... you people! All I'll say is that the prophecy is open to interpretation.*

GiGiFanfic: *I keep telling him, but his muses tell me he's hanging around and not even TRYING to get another chapter out... ;- Thanks for all your support, you've been GREAT!*

Cecikun: *I think we all change between 15 and 35. Harry is a compilation of the person I think he's going to become, and the person I'd like him to be. Like Dumbledore, he plays roles sometimes to achieve the effect he's looking for. I'm glad you're enjoying it.*

Azntgr01: *I haven't decided which yet... I think I'll let my muses guide me.... NOOOOOOOO!*

Larna Mandrea: *I love Harry. He's so easy to write. Oh, and... ice mice rule!!!*

CQ

Chapter Twenty Four: Return to Potter Manor

Blackness. Cool, peaceful, undemanding blackness. Floating in blackness.

Thicker... heavier... deeper. Pressing blackness. Stifling blackness. Suffocating blackness...

Painful blackness.

Green light, and murmuring voices. Anger, pain, adrenaline... muscles tensing...

"Harry, relax. It's okay," a soft, warm voice.

"Ginny?" Harry whispered through dry lips. "Ginny..."

"Sleep, Harry. I've given you a sleeping draught. Sleep. Rest. It's okay."

Peaceful, undisturbed blackness.

Ginny.

"How is he?"

"Asleep," Ginny replied.

"Any..."

"No. I don't know how he..." she stopped, shaking her head. She wasn't going to think about that.

"The Death Curse can't kill him, Gin." Bill stated.

"Bullshit," Ginny snapped angrily. "*This time* it didn't."

"Three times it hasn't," Bill said softly. "Once when he was a fifteen month old child."

"That doesn't mean it *can't*. When will this end?"

"No, it doesn't mean that it can't, but it means it's highly unlikely. I don't know when it will end, Gin, but I know that we have a better chance with Harry leading us."

Ginny was silent, watching her husband sleep.

"I can't identify the spell," Bill said quietly.

Ginny's eyes snapped to his, "What?"

"The last spell he used. He did it without his wand. I can't identify it."

Ginny's eyes widened. She knew that Harry could do wandless magic. He'd been doing it since they were in school, and he was by far the most powerful wizard anyone could remember. He could wave his hand and....

But wandless magic of a level that Bill couldn't trace?

"Gin? I think..." Bill hesitated.

"What?"

"I think it might have been Dark Magic," he said, watching her closely.

Ginny took a sharp breath. "I don't care what it was, so long as that bloody monster is dead."

"Oh, he's dead," Bill confirmed, relieved that his sister wasn't reacting badly to the news that her adored husband might have used Dark Magic in his bid to rid the world of Phillip Mahood. "Fried to a bloody crisp... and I have no idea of how."

Ginny winced. She'd seen the ravages of war. She'd lost family. She knew what was involved. But she also knew how it tore at Harry's soul to be the one to have to kill...

"How are the others?" Bill asked, wanting to distract her from what he knew was going through her mind.

"Ron and Hermione will be fine. I'm keeping them asleep while their skin regrows. That was a very, very nasty curse."

It was Bill's turn to wince. He'd seen the skinning curse in action several times during his years as a curse-breaker. It wasn't pretty. Long, slow, excruciatingly painful death normally followed.

"Luna and Neville will be fine, as well," she continued. "If Neville would stop scratching it would go quicker for him."

"And Tonks?"

"She'll have a nasty scar," Ginny sighed. "But she's lucky to be alive. If it weren't for Charlie getting her to St Mungo's so quickly... well, there was nothing I could have done for her. Kingsley is with her now."

"He's okay?"

"Yes. He'll be fine. Who knew he had a charmed bodysuit?" she smiled sadly. In all honesty, it was all that had saved him.

Bill smiled back. The silence lengthened.

"You're still looking?" Ginny asked suddenly, quietly.

"Every auror the ministry can spare," Bill confirmed.

"Where the hell could he have gone?"

"We're trying to trace the magical signature..." Bill said, then sighed, spreading his hands in a helpless gesture. "But with the originator dead, it's difficult."

"What if he transported him somewhere..." Ginny shook her head. "I keep getting this image of him inside a block of solid rock."

"Ginny, we're looking. We'll find him."

"He's just..."

"I know."

"Severus always seems so... alone. Lonely."

"I know. We'll find him."

"Promise?" Ginny looked up at her older brother, and Bill was reminded of the little girl she had been, when his promises could fix the world for her.

He looked at her, saying nothing. She knew he couldn't promise her that.

Harry slept for six more hours. When he awoke, it was to find Ginny slumped in an uncomfortable looking chair beside his bed. He silently looked around the room. It was one of the larger rooms on the third floor, he recognized the wallpaper.

There were five beds in the room. He could see Ron and Hermione sleeping. Their skin looked red and raw.

The other two beds were occupied by bandaged figures. From their sizes, Harry assumed one was either Tonks or Luna, and the other must be either Neville or Kingsley. Snape was much slimmer.

He took in his situation. He could feel all of his extremities, but he felt heavy, bruised all over. Shifting, he could tell that his chest was bound, but it didn't feel like much else was. Carefully, he pulled himself into a sitting position.

That wasn't too bad, he thought. The slight twinge he'd felt in his side was bearable. *Cracked ribs.*

Swinging one leg over the side, he took a shallow breath before swinging the other over. And looked up to find Ginny's brown eyes on him.

"Don't you ever," she began quietly, "Ever, scare me like that again."

"Not if I can help it," he said solemnly.

"Never. Understand?" she stood, stepping forward and wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. "Never, Harry Potter."

"I love you," he said, kissing the side of her face.

"I love you, too. But I'll save the Dark wizards the trouble and kill you myself if you ever do that to me again."

Harry smiled, holding her close. "How are the others?"

Ginny took a deep breath, "Ron and Hermione are regrowing their skin. He cast a skinning curse on them."

"Dear God," was all Harry could say, looking over at his two best friends. The pain they must have...

"They were both in a lot of pain when they got back here. We... well... it wasn't very pretty."

"But they're okay?"

"Yes. They will be."

"Nev?"

"Neville and Luna were hexed with... well, I'm not sure what it was, exactly. Like an itching hex, but more powerful. They were literally tearing themselves apart when they got here. They'll both be fine, besides some minor scarring."

"And?" Harry said, prompting her.

"Tonks was... well, she was pretty much dead when she got here, there was nothing I could do, but Charlie apparated her to St Mungo's in seconds. They saved her. Some sort of blasting curse to her stomach. But she'll be fine."

"Shack?"

"He's with Tonks. He was only stunned, but..."

"But?"

"Well, three stunners packs a pretty mean punch," she shrugged. "He'll be recovering for a while."

“And Snape?”

Ginny swallowed, unable to say anything.

“Gin?”

“We can't find him, Harry. We've... we've looked everywhere...”

“What do you mean? Your charmed wristband worked... he was hit with a spell and he disappeared.”

“Well, maybe he did, but he didn't come back here. His wristband wasn't activated.”

Harry thought for a moment.

“Which means he's still alive,” he said.

Ginny nodded, “It could mean that, or...”

“Or?”

“Or it could mean that the wristband was destroyed before it could activate, or while activating...”

“Where is Bill?” Harry slid off the bed, coming to stand on two none-too-solid feet.

“Harry, lie down!”

“I've got work to do...”

“You were hit with the Death Curse less than twelve hours ago!”

“Where is Bill, Ginny?”

Huffing angrily, she strode to the door, “*Bill Weasley, get your butt up here!*”

With a pop, the eldest Weasley sibling apparated at Harry's bedside.

“You bellowed, sister?”

"Bill, Ginny says Severus is missing?"

"He never came back, Harry. We assumed..." Bill glanced at Ginny.

"What?"

"Until Ron came to, we thought Snape might have chosen to not return."

"What?" Harry spat.

"Harry, we didn't know who hit you with that curse. Mahood was dead, a pile of ash... by the way, what bloody spell *did* you use on him?"

Harry took a breath and gave his brother in law a level, steely look. "You don't need to know that, Bill."

Bill looked hard into Harry's eyes, then, nodding once, continued. "Well, we didn't know... until Ron came to for a few minutes and told us that he'd seen Snape get hit and disappear..."

"I can't believe that you thought..." Harry steamed.

"Harry, I'm sorry. We were working on limited information. We did the best we could. As soon as Ron told us, we began the search."

"And?"

"Nothing yet. We can't identify the spell..."

"It was *animagus reformus*," Harry stated coolly. "It shouldn't have killed him, and it certainly shouldn't have made him disappear. I assumed when he did disappear that Ginny's wristband had kicked in when it sensed the change."

"What in the hell...?" Bill began, confused.

"You mean...?" Ginny's brow was furrowed. "I didn't..."

"Bill, get McGonagall here."

"On it," Bill quickly left the room.

“Ginny, I need some clothes.”

“You're getting back into that bed,” Ginny stated.

“Ginny, I need to take care of this, then I promise you, I'll stay in bed for as long as you want me to.”

Ginny snorted disbelievingly. “Right. Like you've ever stayed in bed willingly for a day in your life.”

“Well,” Harry smiled, his arms going around her. “I suppose that all depends on the company.”

Showered, shaved, and dressed, Harry felt a little better as he made his way down the stairs and into his den twenty minutes later to find Bill pacing and McGonagall sitting in the leather wingback, looking annoyed.

“Harry... what...?”

“Phillip Mahood is dead, Min.”

“Dear Merlin...”

“And we can't find Sev.”

Minerva gasped, her hands going to her mouth in shock.

“Why didn't you tell me he was an animagus?” Harry asked quietly.

There was a glint in her eyes, but only for a moment. Resignation replaced it.

“How did you find out?”

“Mahood used *animagus reformus* on him. I assumed he was transported back here. However, it would appear that I was wrong.”

“Yes.”

“What is his animagus form, Minerva?”

Minerva sighed, "A serpent."

Harry shook his head. "Typical. Bloody fucking typical. Damned Slytherins."

"Harry," Ginny said from the doorway. "I don't understand. If he transformed into an animagus form, why doesn't he just transform back?"

Harry sighed, "It's not that easy, Ginny."

"*Animagus reformus* doesn't transform you, it *reforms* you," Bill explained. "Essentially, it's a Dark Magic spell, because you can't transform yourself back. You've been *reformed*. Permanently."

"You mean, Severus has been turned into a snake... forever?"

"Not if I can find him," Harry said. "I don't know if he's cognizant. Bill, you're going to have to help me."

"Harry?" Ginny looked startled, her voice was frightened as she watched her husband sit down on the couch. "What are you doing?"

"Sev taught me mind control, Ginny. We... shared parts of our minds."

"So?"

"So, I'm hoping he retained a bit of mine. If he did, I might be able to tap into it, and see what he sees."

"Harry..."

"Relax, Ginny. It's fine. Bill, contact the people out there. Tell them to be on the lookout for a snake acting strangely. Tell them *not* to touch it, or harm it in any way."

Harry closed his eyes and intentionally drifted. He ribs hurt, but he blocked that out. His body felt heavy, tired, but he blocked that out as well.

He concentrated on the memories he had gotten from Snape during their training sessions. It had always disturbed him that he shared this

link with someone he didn't like very much, but over the years, as he had gotten to know the prickly Potions master, he had come to realize that the link was actually nothing to be bothered about.

He started getting short visual flashes. Although his eyes were closed, he could 'see'... something. As the flashes became more frequent and clear, he realized he was looking at grass... a snakes eye view of it, of course.

Suddenly, the flashes coagulated into a streaming connection.

“Sev?” he said.

“Harry!”

“Are you okay?”

“I believe so. I'm... concerned, though.”

“You'll be fine, now.”

“*Animagus reformus* is permanent, Harry.”

“Not if I can get to you soon, it's not.”

“I don't know where I am. I can't see a damned thing.”

“Stop,” Harry ordered. Immediately the vision from the serpent's eyes stilled. “Lift your head and look around.”

Snape did, and Harry could see nothing but grass and rocks.

“Turn around,” he said.

He turned, giving Harry a three hundred and sixty five degree view.

“Okay, I think I know where you are, Sev.”

“Oh?”

“I'll be with you in a minute. Stay there.”

"Where else would I go?" Snape asked bitingly.

Harry opened his eyes to find Bill, McGonagall, and Ginny staring at him.

"What?" he asked at their strange looks.

"Just... parseltongue," Ginny said.

"Oh. Sorry," Harry flushed. "I know where he is. I'm going to apparate to him and bring him back here."

"Harry..."

"Gin, it needs to be done, and I'm the only one who can."

Ginny sighed, "Why does it always have to be you?"

Harry kissed her and smiled. "Just stay here, okay?"

"Where would I go?" she asked dryly.

In moments, Harry found himself standing in a field, then looking searchingly at the ground. It was a full five minutes before he found what he was looking for.

Severus Snape, coiled and hissing at him.

Okay, so the responses to my little cliffie were... overwhelming, to say the least. Hey, the last chapter got the most reviews yet! But, now that I've put you all out of your misery, I suppose I'd better answer a few questions.

There are two chapters left, I think. That is what I have written, anyhow, but they need editing, and I might cut and paste... so until you see the word "FINIS", it's not over.

I really appreciate all your reviews. You really are the most amazing readers. Thank you.

CQ

Katherine Rose: Here you go, as requested!

Lizlitaraius: Trust me, being referred to as “something decent to read” on here is no small compliment. I thank you.

James Milamber: Sorry, Shotgun beat you to it and submitted the 100th review. More frequent updates? My dear, he who lives in a glass house...

UnRealitycheck: I would imagine the transformation was... spreading. However, use your imagination. Normally, use of an unforgivable would mean a one-way ticket to Azkaban, but Malfoy confessed and was therefore granted leniency. In the heat of battle, many things were forgiven, or overlooked. Our heroes did their own share of “unforgivable” casting... but the ends were assumed to justify the means. Also, the whole point of that kitchen/den scene was to show that the brothers were so distracted that they missed the perfect opportunity that normally they would have had either a very bad reaction to, or used to tease Harry mercilessly.

Lalaluu: Thank you!

Larna Mandrea: I can always rely on you for a major feel-good review! Thanks!

Merlindamage: Sorry! So very sorry! cringing in my seat here!. Wow, I didn't expect THAT strong a reaction!

GiGifanfic: Thanks! Yes, it would appear that Milamber is writing again. One can only hope he keeps it up IN A MORE REGULAR FASHION! (Are you listening JAMES?) I have a feeling all his readers should take up a collection for coffee and doughnuts to keep him going! ;-

Shotgunn: HEY! Okay, YOU... OUT OF MY HEAD! You're not supposed to guess the outcomes of cliffies... I'm sure it's written down around here somewhere! And as for the British football, I'm married to a British ex-pat, and I had to LEARN to enjoy it or lose him for hours on Sundays to it. Did you know that they have special satellite television packages in Canada for us to get our fix? As for Milamber and his muses, the last time I talked to him, one of them was up a

tree and he was threatening them both with a cricket bat. The guy needs to get out more, and work some of that caffeine out of his system, I think. So long as he keeps updating, though...

BTW – congratulations on being my 100th reviewer!!!

Saerry Snape: *From HELL? Oh, my. And here I thought it was so well constructed... ;-*

CQ

Chapter Twenty Five: And baby makes...

Harry glanced over at Ginny. These political parties were boring to begin with, but at eight plus months pregnant, Ginny tired easily.

He stood for a moment, just watching her. The deep green of her dress robes set off her beautiful hair, which tonight was piled in an intricate upsweep that Hermione had charmed into being when Ginny had declared before leaving the Manor that she didn't much care what it looked like.

Seeing her laugh at what the man next to her said, Harry knew it was time for them to leave. He knew that laugh. It was the one that said she was almost out of patience, but was trying to be polite anyhow.

Moving quietly through the crowd to her side, he slipped a hand against the small of her back, and felt her press back against him gratefully.

"I'm terribly sorry, but my wife needs her rest," he smiled at the man next to her, their host. "This has been lovely, but we really do need to go."

"Of course, Minister! Of course!"

Harry, holding Ginny's hand, led her through the packed room to the hallway. "Ready?"

"I was ready two hours ago," she said tiredly, leaning against his chest and closing her eyes. "Take me home, Harry, and put me to bed, please."

Harry chuckled, "Now there is an invitation that any bloke in his right mind would love to hear."

An instant later, they were standing in their bedroom. Harry quickly helped her off with her robes and underthings, and slipped a long white nightgown over her head. He smiled as it tugged over her distended belly. Ginny was carrying either a very large baby, which was entirely possible given his own six foot two frame, or a baby rhino.

"What are you grinning at?" she spat at him.

"My beautiful wife," he shrugged.

"Yeah, yeah. You mean your fat, ugly, exhausted wife who's sick of playing 'bus'."

Harry's eyebrows rose at this, but he wisely said nothing. He strongly suspected that anything he said to that comment would be taken wrong.

"What?" she snapped as he helped her into bed, then tucked the quilts around her.

"I was just thinking..."

"Really?" she said sarcastically. This, too, he ignored.

"...that for a fat, ugly, exhausted woman, you're awfully beautiful."

Ginny, narrowed her eyes dangerously at him.

"Go to sleep, love," he smiled. "You need the rest. I'm sorry I kept you out so long."

At that, her eyes began to tear up. "Oh, Harry! I'm horrible! I'm so sorry, I don't *mean* to be cranky..." she threw her arms around him.

"I know, Gin. I can't imagine what you're going through, but I love you for it." He held her close for a moment, then helped her lie back and reorganized the covers.

"Sleep, love."

"Thank you, Harry..."

Harry retreated to his study where he found Ron staring into the fire.

"Hey."

"Oh, hi..." Ron sounded strange. For Ron.

"What's wrong?" Harry sat down in the large leather chair he favored.

"Just... thinking."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, you know... life, the universe... everything."

Harry's eyebrows rose, amused.

"Sounds deep."

"Harry, what's it like to be married?"

It took him a minute to shift gears... "Um... good?"

Ron glanced at him, his ears going pink when he realized that Harry was looking at him curiously.

"I..."

"Ron? What's this about?"

"I want to..." Ron sighed. "I've been thinking about..."

"Hermione?"

Ron sighed again, "Yeah."

A grin slid into place on Harry's face. "Congratulations, mate. Can I be best man?"

Ron turned panicked eyes to him. "She hasn't... I haven't..."

"Yet."

"I haven't even asked her, Harry."

"Yet."

"She might say no."

Harry snorted, "Not likely."

"She might!" Ron sounded rather desperate.

Harry laughed. "Ron, she's nuts about you. She's not going to say 'no'."

"She could."

"Ron," Harry looked him straight in the eye. "She lets you scratch in public."

"So?"

"You'll understand someday, I'm sure."

"So, because she lets me scratch, she'll say yes?"

"Pretty much," Harry agreed.

"I'll never understand women, Harry."

"Join the club, my friend. Join the club."

"Harry?"

"Tomorrow, okay? I'll do it..."

"Harry, wake up."

"Gin?" Harry came aware of his wife shaking his shoulder.

"Harry, wake up. Please."

"Ginny? What is it? What's wrong?" he reached onto his bedside table for his wand. Ginny had made him stop keeping it under his pillow when he'd had a nightmare and turned his pillow into a mongoose. A very crispy, charred mongoose.

"Harry... I think... ugh..."

"Gin?" he was suddenly wide awake as he felt her tense.

"Harry... the baby..."

"Dear Merlin!" he jumped out of bed, pulling on the pajama bottoms he never wore to bed, but kept next to the bed in case he needed to get up in the night.

"... is coming!" she cried as the contraction ended.

"Right now?" he asked, panicked.

"No, maybe next Thursday! Yes, *right now!*"

Her sharp tone made him take a breath, and suddenly, he was calm.

"Okay, Gin, let me get your mother..." He strode to the door, opened it, and bellowed, "*Molly!*"

"Oh, very good, Potter," Ginny said. "Wake up the entire bloody household, why don't you?"

"They'll all be up as soon as your mother figures out what is going on."

"Harry? What is it?" Molly rushed in, tying her robe as she came, Arthur behind her with his wand out.

"The baby is coming, Mum," Ginny said, trying to sit up so Harry could arrange the pillows behind her.

"Molly, can you go call the midwife?" Harry asked. "Arthur, we're going to need Hermione in here, I think."

"Of course, Harry," Arthur smiled, quickly leaving the room after his wife.

"He's in for a surprise," Ginny commented caustically.

"What?' Harry said, as he heard a knock down the hall.

"Hermione, love... Oh! Terribly sorry... I... Ron, Hermione, Ginny is... Ginny..."

"It's okay, Mr Weasley. We'll be right there," they heard Hermione's sleepy voice.

Harry and Ginny exchanged glances, grinning. If Ron thought his mother's determination was strong before, it was nothing on what it was going to be now.

"Harry!" Ginny began to pant. "Harry..."

"Another one, love?" he looked at his watch.

"Am I *boring* you?" she snapped.

"I'm noting the time so we can tell how far apart they are," he explained.

"Oh..." she grunted with the pain. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be. You're wonderful, and you have *nothing* to be sorry about."

With that, he lifted her a bit and, supporting her weight, he pushed the pillows out of the way and slid in behind her, one leg on either side, cradling her against his bare chest.

"Oh, Harry..." she groaned as the pain ebbed.

"They seem... close?" he said hesitantly.

"I was... I think I might have been in labor earlier," she said.

"Earlier? When?" he asked. She hadn't appeared any different before bed, except the exhaustion.

"Er... today?"

"Today? You mean, at the party?"

"I mean... all day."

"*All day?*"

"Well, since about... noon."

"Noon?" Harry cried. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Well, you had to attend that party, and I knew it would be hours..."

"Ginny Potter, if you ever do anything so silly again, I swear to Merlin..."

"Oh, *Harry*..." she writhed, holding his hands and pressing back against him as another pain hit.

He twisted his arm and, ignoring the pain, looked at his watch.

Two minutes.

Now, Harry Potter didn't know much about the birthing process, but he was reasonably certain that two minutes between pains wasn't good if the midwife hadn't arrived yet.

"*Hermione!*" he yelled, just as the door opened and both Hermione and Janie entered.

"Two *minutes*, Mione!" Harry said. "Where in the hell is the midwife?"

"Molly is just trying to find her, Harry."

"*Find her?* We're having a *baby* here!"

"Harry, relax," Hermione said, pulling the quilts off the bed and heaving them into a pile in the corner, leaving Ginny covered with just a sheet.

Pulling this out from where it was tucked at the foot of the bed, Janie and Hermione folded it neatly up until Ginny's feet were peeking from beneath it.

"Gin?" Hermione leaned over her, brushing her red hair from her damp forehead. "Your mom is getting the midwife, but she's not here yet. Do you mind if I have a look?"

"Please, Mione..." Ginny panted, tensing as she fought another pain. "I don't think the midwife is going to make it!"

Hermione lifted the sheet away from Ginny's knees. Harry watched as surprise flitted across her face and then as she glanced up at Janie, who immediately headed for the en suite bath.

"Okay, Ginny," Hermione helped Ginny to bend her legs at the knees. "It looks like you're right, you're already crowning."

Ginny didn't respond as she tensed again against Harry.

Janie came hurriedly in carrying a stack of towels and another of damp cloths. Nobody noticed Ron slip into the room and up to the side of the bed as Hermione and Janie worked, and Harry supported his wife against his broad chest.

"Okay, Gin," Hermione smiled reassuringly. "I think this is it. When you feel the next one take hold, I want you to bear down, okay?"

Ginny nodded and Harry brushed the damp hair out of her face. Out of nowhere, a damp cloth was handed to him. Harry glanced to the side to see Ron sitting there, on the edge of a chair, holding out the cloth.

"Thanks."

Ron nodded. His face was paper-white, but he wasn't panicking.

Harry wiped Ginny's face gently with the cool cloth, and Ginny sighed.

"Here it comes, Harry," she said softly. "Hold my hands..."

"Harry took her hands in his own, and felt all blood leave them as she began to squeeze.

"Okay, Gin... go... go... push... push... push... push..." Hermione chanted.

With a strange sound and a wail, Harry and Ginny's baby was born.

"Merlin," said Janie. "Look at that hair!"

"Bloody heartburn," Ginny gasped.

"It's a boy, Harry," Hermione smiled gently up at him as she wiped the baby with a warm towel.

"Mione... I'm... I feel like..." Ginny panted.

"It's the afterbirth, Gin..." Hermione wrapped the baby in a fresh towel and lifted him.

"No..." Ginny said. "Hermione!"

Glancing down, Hermione gave one shocked squeak before handing the baby she was holding quickly to a surprised Ron and reaching down again.

Another wail, a shriek, and then...

"And a girl," Hermione looked up, her eyes full of tears. "Oh, my..."

"Twins!" Janie cried. "Oh, Ginny!"

"Gin?" Harry held her, speaking softly into her ear. "Any more surprises, love?"

"No, Harry. I think I'm done," she smiled weakly, exhausted.

Harry looked up to see Molly and Arthur in the doorway. Bill and Charlie and Amelia behind them. There was a lot of love in this room to welcome his children.

"Harry?"

Harry turned to see Ron, a wriggling bundle in his arms. "I think this is yours..."

Harry gently shifted to the side, so Ginny was pressed back against his heart, as Ron laid the bundle against his right arm. Hermione, finished with their daughter, leaned down and laid the other wrapped bundle in Ginny's arms.

Harry looked down into the face of his son, and felt the tears in his eyes. Looking down over Ginny, he looked at his daughter. His fourth daughter.

Where her brother had a shock of thick black hair, hers was bright Weasley red and standing on end.

"Oh, Harry... look at her!" Ginny breathed.

At that moment, she opened her eyes and blinked up at her parents. She had deep green eyes.

"Oh, my... " Ginny said.

"She looks just like..." Harry swallowed.

"She looks just like your mother, Harry." Ginny said softly. "Green eyes and all."

James Albus Potter and Lily Mione Potter were born twelve minutes and seventeen minutes after three on the morning of April ninth, two weeks early, but perfect and healthy. They were born nearly half an hour before the hurried arrival of the rather panicked midwife. Harry and Ginny let her do her examinations of mother and babies, but given the fact that she hadn't made it for the birth, nor had she ever given them a clue that they might have twins, Harry turned to Hermione to tell him how his wife was doing, and decided that he would have a doctor from St Mungo's visit the following day.

Molly fussed over her new grandchildren while Arthur made a hurried phone call to Hogwarts to tell the girls of their new siblings' arrival. The others retreated to the kitchen for an early breakfast.

While Charlie and Amelia worked at the stove preparing eggs and sausage, and Bill made toast, Ron served coffee to Hermione and Janie at the table.

"Wow," Janie laughed. "Here I thought that Amelia and I were the experienced ones, and the only unmarried woman in the family took over as though she was the resident obstetrician!"

Hermione smiled, sipping her coffee.

"Hermione... where did you... ?" Amelia turned to look at her curiously. "How did you know what to do?"

Hermione looked up, grinning. "Don't blame me, it's all Maura Kennedy's doing. I was stuck in a little town near Riyadh once... there was me, my cameraman, and a foreign aid worker stuck in this *really* small hospital for three weeks. We couldn't get out because of the bombing..."

"So?" Amelia asked.

"Well, they only had one doctor and one nurse. It was a really small hospital. More of a clinic, really. They were very busy trying to keep injured civilians alive. The theory was that childbirth was a natural process, so a woman should be able to go through it unattended. If she couldn't, well..."

"Ugh..." Amelia grimaced. "Let me guess, *male* doctor and *male* nurse?"

Hermione shrugged. "Well, it turned out that half the town's women were pregnant, and half of those were due to give birth within those three weeks. At least, that's what it seemed like."

"So you..." Ron paled.

"Someone had to help them, Ron," she said quietly. "The cameraman turned out to be a pretty good surgical nurse, actually."

"You didn't..."

"Someone had to. There were books... I didn't go in blind. But when the doctor refused to do a caesarian section on a woman who needed it... well, she would have died. I had to do something."

"Dear Merlin, Mione!"

The others all stood, staring at her.

"In a place like that, a time like that..." Hermione said quietly, a shadow in her eyes. "The rules are very different."

Sitting next to her, Ron leaned over, pulling her into his arms.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for being you, Hermione."

She looked up at him, smiling, and suddenly, he knew.

"Mione, I love you," he said. The others all turned surprised looked on him. Ron didn't even notice. Nor did he notice Molly and Arthur enter the room.

"I want you to be with me forever. I never want you to have to face things like... that... alone again. Mione, will you marry me?"

Hermione's eyes widened, then filled with tears.

"Oh, Ron... of course I will!"

Major fluff chapter, but I had to include it. Next one is the last.... I hope you enjoy it!

Saerry Snape: *No more cliffies! I promise! In this fic, at least. Now the next one... no promises!*

Azntgr01: *Size isn't everything grin!*

James Milamber: *Too late, we (HPMM fans) have it all planned. First, we flood you with offerings of chocolate and coffee, then, when Mind Mage is done, we stage an intervention. Snape as a bat? Hmmm....possible. It was just the Slytherin thing, though....*

Faraway: *Thanks!*

Merlindamage: *Is it ever REALLY over? Well, one more chapter to go. Perhaps your questions will be answered there, or maybe you'll have to wait for the sequel (which I've already begun to write...). This really is addictive.*

Shotgunn: *Nooo! Not a pessimist! Harry CAN'T die! I'd personally hunt JKR down if she did that! Who's with me? James? You got your cricket bat??*

CQ

Chapter Twenty Six: Epilogue

*Their time is now as the masses gather,
They will love, and a new generation will be born,
And in that, their motivations will become clear.
Those in denial of our world will most need it
when the skies erupt and fire scorches the earth.
The western world will hold their own,
but victory is unassured.
Only with a return to true belief in all things magical
will our world be balanced.
Good and evil, black and white, East and West.
The power no longer hidden
will be the only defense.*

The group that gathered around the table that night was sombre, yet happy. Those who had faced Mahood, those who had suffered at his hands, and those who loved them.

Harry sat at the head of the long dining table, watching them all, and wondering how he had come to be the person he was now. As he caught Ginny's eye, she smiled at him, and he realized how truly blessed he really was.

From childhood, he had never really had anyone to call family. Sure, the Weasley's had been there for him, as parents, as siblings, through the years. From the time he was eleven years old he had been able to rely on this family. And now, through Ginny, they truly were his own, as riotous and loving as he could ever have wished for.

Ginny and the girls, he thought, looking at each of them in turn. The blessings that he had had to lose her to gain. Dean's children, but his, too.

And their children. He looked to Ron, who balanced Jamie on his knee with one arm firmly around the boy's pudgy body.

Looking at Jamie's twin sister, Harry's smile widened. Lily Mione had stolen the heart of the least expected person there. Severus Snape held the baby gently, paying more attention to her than to his meal. Lily seemed okay with it as she gazed around the room, secure in the former Death Eater's gentle arms.

Arthur, seated at the other end of the long table, with Molly at his side, smiling down at his bride of nearly fifty years.

All of Ginny's siblings, all but Percy, of course, and their spouses and children.

Somehow, he had acquired a very large family.

And Hermione. *She will take her rightful place by his side, to die together, as was meant to be, from the beginning of time.* Hermione had found her place, next to Ron, and Harry had no doubt that in the fullness of time, the prophecy would be proven true. Anywhere one was in danger, the other would be by their side. He hoped that that part of the prophecy was years away yet.

Tonks sat, toying with her food. Harry knew that she found it difficult to eat at times. The doctors said she would recover fully, and Harry hoped it was true. She laughed at something Charlie said, and Harry was reminded of the young woman he had first met over twenty years ago.

Kingsley sat to her left. Kingsley, who had been her partner for years, and was never far from her side these days. Harry suspected... well... perhaps.

Luna and Neville sat together. There was another couple brought together from this. Luna smiled at her shy husband. They'd been married for four months now. Harry suspected that they'd be hearing

another happy announcement from them soon. Luna had a look about her... but perhaps it was just happiness.

Colin Creavey sat next to Minerva. Neither of them had been there that night, but they were both involved. Harry had asked them both to attend because they were as central to it all as the rest of them, and in some strange way, were also family.

The program at Hogwarts last year had been considered an unqualified success. While the mainstream muggle world still hadn't accepted that a magical one existed, there were many within it that had. Over nine hundred people had been through the Hogwarts basic course, and almost one hundred of those had been asked to stay on for further study. In time, it would succeed.

Harry's thoughts turned to that night, the reason for *this* night's celebration, one year later, and what he must do. In spite of it, he smiled.

Those loyal to Mahood and the Dark cause were still operating. While the war in the middle east continued in the muggle world, the magical world had taken a bit of a break after Mahood's death. Harry knew that it was just that. A break. Just a breather between rounds. He knew it would start again, and soon.

Things must be done. This group, especially, needed to be told. They were not finished, and they must be told of the new prophecy. As he looked at each of them, Harry felt strong. These people were his strength. They were the reason why he fought, and would continue to fight, for the Light.

"Harry?" Ron looked at him as he lifted Harry's son up against his shoulder to burp him. Harry smiled at this. "Something wrong?"

Harry hesitated, not wanting to spoil the mood this night. Knowing that it would come... within the month he must speak to them.

But not now. For now, he wanted them to feel the peace that he so longed for.

"No, Ron. Nothing," he said with a sad smile. "Right now, everything is fine."

FINIS

Thank you all so much. You have no idea of how very much your support and encouragement have meant to me in writing this, my first fanfic.

I promise, I will be posting in the not-too-distant future with a sequel, which I have already begun. Watch for it.

CQ